Book Review

Sajjanhar, Anuradha. *The New Experts: Populist Elites and Technocratic Promises in Modi's India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. ISBN 9781009326833. xvi + 272 pp.

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In *The New Experts: Populist Elites and Technocratic Promises in Modi's India*, Anuradha Sajjanhar examines how the Hindu nationalist movement, particularly under Narendra Modi's leadership, has worked to replace the established technocratic order. This involves promoting alternative experts and institutions aligned with the Hindutva agenda of reshaping Indian society. The book explores how populist mobilisation, technocratic governance, and anti-establishment rhetoric intersect to legitimise this shift. Central to the BJP's strategy is the replacement of the old intellectual elite with a new class of experts endorsed and promoted to reflect the party's ideological goals. Sajjanhar analyses this transformation through the dual lenses of populism and technocracy. Though she does not define populism formally, she associates it with a right-wing, anti-elitist, and anti-intellectual stance that often appears at odds with technocracy. Nevertheless, she argues that in India, populism and technocracy function together to consolidate and institutionalise Hindu nationalist power. Here the book suffers from conceptual ambiguity. Without a clear definition of populism, its core argument becomes difficult to grasp. Sajjanhar tends to treat populism not just as a political strategy but also as part of the ideological content it supports. However, dominant definitions of populism describe it as a political form, not content, typically involving rhetorical appeals to broad electorates and the creation of antagonisms (Weyland, 2001; Laclau, 2005). A sharper distinction between strategy and agenda would have strengthened the analysis. Populism is not inherently opposed to technocracy, as it can serve various ideological aims. Sajjanhar's account suggests an attempt to replace the dominant institutional worldview with a Hindu nationalist one. Framing this process, for instance, through Gramsci's (1971) notion of "common sense" would have clarified the ideological struggle. Despite early conceptual confusion, the book insightfully traces how the Sangh Parivar reshapes hegemonic common sense.

The second chapter functions as a contextualising section, where the

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author introduces the ideological and empirical background of the current shape of the Sangh Parivar and BJP rule. Sajjanhar outlines the ideological origins of Hindutva, tracing them back to the late 19th century, when a group of upper-caste Brahmins aspired to resurrect an imagined ancient India as a Hindu glory. Moreover, she emphasises how the thoughts of Savarkar, Golwalkar, and Upadhyaya became popular and were shaped within the RSS to serve Hindutva as a political process aimed at establishing a Hindu nation. At the core lies the phenomenological idea that Hinduism is the spiritual essence of India, which makes Hindutva appear secular, as it supposedly aligns with the objective nature of the country. Furthermore, the chapter describes how, in 2014, the BJP achieved a landslide electoral victory through a campaign that utilised social media strategies, reached all electorates with contradictory themes, and criticised Congress as an old, elitist organisation deeply corrupted and unable to stabilise economic growth. In contrast, the BJP promised efficiency in policymaking and to clean up the dusty and dysfunctional system of governance. Sajjanhar argues that in terms of economic policy, the BJP has traditionally supported, and continues to pursue, pro-business neoliberal reforms that embrace globalisation. However, she notes that the BJP has also sought to dismantle the rights-based policy programmes it inherited from the UPA government.

The third chapter of the book lays the groundwork for understanding how the Hindutva project has been operationalised not only through populist election campaigns, but also projected into the wider policymaking community via think tanks. Sajjanhar considers think tanks as mediating institutions that reconcile the tension between populism and technocracy. This network of various think tanks operates as a community which, through the cross-pollination of agendas, often adopts common paradigms around policy questions, thereby shaping what is perceived as *common sense*. She argues that the BJP strategically uses party-affiliated think tanks to influence policy discourse in India. Furthermore, the government has actively sought to replace the old "policy elites" or "intellectuals" with experts and thinkers who align with the ideological aims of the Hindutva project. As an example, she highlights the replacement of the Planning Commission with NITI Aayog, which operates on more ad hoc principles and is more readily controlled. She also discusses how Hindu nationalists are attempting to seize agenda-setting and expert authority from the traditionally English-speaking, often Western-educated elite. In addition, the BJP is working to cultivate a new generation of policy experts rooted in the Hindutva worldview.

Chapter Four analyses the growing role of management consultancy firms, such as the Big Four, in two domains: assisting political parties with election campaigns and supporting the government in policy planning and data collection. Sajjanhar argues that the BJP's anti-elitist discourse since 2014 has legitimised the expanded use

of consultancies, framing it as a shift toward more technocratic governance. However, the link between this shift and democratic accountability is not clearly established. It remains unclear how using external advisors for campaign planning diminishes accountability, as voters still elect party-nominated candidates. While consultancies may enhance campaign efficiency by using data-driven targeting, this alone does not constitute a democratic deficit. Similarly, the extent of their influence in policy processes is ambiguous. Have consultancy firms displaced IAS officers, or are they supplementing bureaucratic work? Do politicians rely on them to bypass an allegedly obstructive or ideologically incompatible bureaucracy? These questions remain unanswered. Moreover, the author's use of technocratic seems inconsistent as it appears to refer specifically to private consultants. Yet policymaking led by civil servants would also be technocratic, if defined by expertise-driven decision-making. This conceptual ambiguity complicates the reader's ability to understand how consultancies relate to broader themes of democratic decline or ideological transformation. As a result, the chapter feels somewhat disconnected from the book's central focus on Hindutva and cultural hegemony and might have benefited from a clearer articulation of how managerialism intersects with the political project of the BJP.

Chapter Five returns to how the Hindutva-nationalist bloc aims not only to replace policymaking elites but also to embed its ideological foundations within education, universities, and the media. The analysis centres on two BJP-affiliated think tanks in New Delhi: The Chanakya Institute and the India Foundation. The author argues that these institutions seek to legitimise Hindutva by presenting it in an apolitical form that resonates with people's intuitive understandings of society, reflecting again Gramsci's concept of common sense and cultural hegemony. Also, Gramsci is finally mentioned! (p. 140). The chapter offers revealing and often entertaining insights into the inner workings of the think tanks, illustrating how Hindutva organisations perceive themselves, interpret the world, and attempt to reshape society. It details their aesthetics, what they symbolise, and the contents of their libraries, including books on the RSS worldview, the appeasement of Muslims, and the supposed Christian threat to India's unity. The think tanks promote narratives of a Hindu renaissance arising after a millennium of enslavement under Muslims and the British, asserting that only Hindu nationalism can prevent future subjugation. While the Chanakya Institute primarily focuses on influencing public discourse, the India Foundation is directly involved in BJP mobilisation, including activities such as election funding.

The overall focus of the book is on the different aspects of the contemporary phase of the Hindutva political project and how the Sangh Parivar seeks to establish a cultural hegemony in India by replacing the ideological foundations of its institutions. However, the conceptual confusion noted earlier makes the core argument harder

to follow. Additionally, the relationship between populism, Hindutva's cultural hegemony, and the increasing role of consultancy firms in politics feels misaligned. The discussion of technocracy and consultancy firms appears disconnected from the book's broader focus. This material might have been better suited to two separate studies: one on inreasing role of consultancy firms in Indian politics and its implications, and another on the replacement of hegemonic societal ideology. This division would have also allowed more room to explore and map the Hindu nationalist think tank sphere, such as the Swadeshi Jagran Manch or the Council for International Economic Understanding, assessing their differing roles in the process of saffronisation. Moreover, it could have been beneficial to engage even more with literature on technocracy and managerialism to understand how these phenomena intersect in India's context of populism, Hindu nationalism, and governance that emphasises consultancy over civil society linkages. Nonetheless, the book addresses an important theme relevant beyond India, shedding light on ethnic nationalism. Its extensive field research offers valuable insight into grassroots political mobilisation.

References

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