

Book Review: India's Power Elite: Class, Caste and a Cultural Revolution by Sanjaya Baru

In India's Power Elite: Class, Caste and a Cultural Revolution, Sanjaya Baru explores change and continuity in the making and workings of India's power elite, moving from the colonial period to the decades since independence. The book offers an engaging account of the changing nature of the Indian state and will be a worthwhile read for those seeking to learn about the contestations and contradictions within Indian power structures, writes Suraj Beri.

India's Power Elite: Class, Caste and a Cultural Revolution. Sanjaya Baru. Penguin Random House India. 2021.

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In order to understand the structure of inequalities and domination in India, we need an updated empirical account of the evolving nature of Indian power structures. Since independence in 1947, there have been scholarly attempts to map the nature and character of India's elites who have come to rule the polity, business and socio-cultural life. Over the last few decades, structural changes in Indian political and economic life have been incremental. In [India's Power Elite](#), Sanjaya Baru sets out to describe change and continuity in the making and workings of India's power elite, moving from the colonial period to the decades that have passed since independence.

Along with a study of the changing balance of elite power, Baru also narrates the social and political transformations that have led to the decline of the Congress Party and the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a ruling force. By mapping the interconnections of social, political and economic elites across twelve chapters, Baru throws light on the restructuring of the power elite and its implications for India's social and cultural landscape.

Baru begins the first two chapters by analysing the cultural and ideological shifts brought out by the new power elite. Drawing analogies with Mao Zedong's strategies of Cultural Revolution in unsettling the ruling establishment in China in the 1970s, Baru highlights the subversive tone of the new power elite aimed at purging the influence of the old elites. For instance, by popularising phrases such as 'Lutyen's Elite', 'Khan Market Gang', 'Congress Mukt Bharat' ('Congress Free India') and promoting a personality cult, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has led a new power elite that seeks to disturb the social equilibrium set in place by the old Nehruvian elite (25-26). According to Baru, a unique mix of Hindu nationalism, linguistic chauvinism, class populism and anti-elitism has become the basis of the political and cultural mobilisation of this new power elite that is gradually entering into Delhi's Lutyen club, as it represents the elite networks of politicians, bureaucrats, business magnates and intellectuals in Delhi (6-7).





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Baru claims that the aim of his book is not to address academic audiences per se, but rather to draw insights from the historical, political and cultural discourses of Indian power elites. And yet, as the author tells us in the third chapter, the theoretical inspiration for this text comes from US sociologist C. Wright Mills's influential study of American elites in the 1960s (50). Baru also refers to the analyses of socio-cultural domination and political power by scholars like Antonio Gramsci, Pierre Bourdieu, Michał Kalecki and Francine Frankel.

In the fourth chapter, Baru explores the role of democratic politics, the increased political and economic strength of the intermediate castes and the role of the state in shaping social dominance and political clout. He identifies important factors – caste, class, language and region – that define and shape the idea of 'the elite' in India. Based on their access to social, economic and political resources, capitalists, the landed aristocracy, politicians, bureaucrats and social media celebrities are identified as India's elites.

Baru traces the changing profiles of elites through key elite locations, such as the India International Centre, the Gymkhana Club, the Golf Club, the Confederation of Indian Industry and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry. Through this, he examines the enduring nexus between business, politics and bureaucracy as key to understanding the circulation of elites.

One of the major shifts in the Indian power structure over the past seven decades has been the growing significance of money and wealth. Many regional power elites have entered into the national elite networks by mobilising financial capital and via bargaining with national elites. According to Baru, this shifting of the loyalties of regional elites from the Congress Party to regional political parties also marked the downfall of Congress hegemony in India. This transition has been quite gradual and orderly, without any violent upheavals.

The core contribution of this book rests with its series of critical arguments about how India's power elite has tried to challenge and dethrone the old elite by promoting a grand discourse of anti-elitism and anti-dynastic rule, consolidating its presence by redefining the nation and its institutions. Designed to reach an audience beyond academia, the language is lucid, accessible and quite polemical at times. Baru cites several publicly available writings, media reports, personal memoirs and interview transcripts as sources to make his claims about the rise of a new elite that uses the language of anti-elitism and anti-intellectualism as key discourses to attract different middle and lower classes and gain regional legitimacy.

However, this book is not without its shortcomings. A major limitation is the lack of empirical detail in the chapters on the nexus between political and bureaucratic elites, though there is some historical data provided on business elites and their political role from the colonial period onwards. It also does not provide any detailed story of the struggles experienced by the old decaying elites, who somehow try to remain relevant in turbulent times. The discussion of the different sections of the elite in the second half of the book also misses the analytical rigour which is a key strength of the book's first half. It would have been beneficial to hear more from Baru on the remaking of the rules and codes of inclusion and exclusion in India's elite institutions today.

The most fascinating part of *India's Power Elite* is where the author details the love-hate relationships between the industrialists and the state, the root of the nexus between business and politics, by drawing upon the Bombay Plan which was prepared as a model for the Indian political economy post-independence. Even if it is quite a daunting task to map India's elites located in different social spheres, it will be a rewarding exercise to interrogate elite configurations to make sense of democracy and continuing hierarchies in contemporary India.

Baru's book traces these movements within elite configurations, the nature of the new elites and the struggles of the old beneficiaries. He concludes that there may be only two possibilities that would pose some challenge to the rise of this new power elite: either a revival of strong opposition or the serious collapse of the economy. *India's Power Elite* provides an engaging account of the changing nature of the Indian state, from its developmental phase to its present capitalist mode, as a backdrop to map the trajectory of transformations within India's power elite. This book is a worthwhile read for scholars and students seeking to learn about the contestations and contradictions within Indian power structures.

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