

**Book Review**

**Review of Sanjay Baru, *India's power elite: class, caste and a cultural revolution*, Viking, (India), Penguin Viking, 2021, viii + 246 pp., Rs 699 (hardback), ISBN 9780670092444**

**Reviewed by**

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Elite as a category has caught the attention of the political scientist and sociologist worldwide, for it captures the essence of the society being analysed. Historically, elite in any society always occupied the driving seat and some scholars argue that they are the drivers of history in one way or the other. C. Wright Mills was one such American scholar to theorise and come out with the conclusion that it is the elite who run the show in modern day America. Mills is heavily relied upon by the author whom he acknowledges as the source of inspiration to write the book.

By extension, as per the author, the elite rule holds true for all the post-colonial societies and India is no exception. The binary of 'elite' versus the 'masses' becomes very important to analyse many new facets of the rise of populism globally. Undoubtedly, we are living in an age of populism and there is a flurry of leaders, globally, to rewrite the rules of the game in favour of the 'masses'. Populist leader is a leader who panders to the 'masses' and opposes the 'elite', for the latter is corrupt and living off the sweat of the former. It's another story that the leadership itself may be entrenched in power for a substantial period of time. However, he happens to be representing the 'masses' using various methods. According to Baru, Narendra Modi was deeply entrenched in state level politics and was chief minister for a considerable period, before coming to national scene as powerful challenger to the 'Lutyens' elite'.

India is not aloof from the developments happening elsewhere. In 2014, a party led by Narendra Modi came to power ending a spell of coalition governments. Narendra Modi did not come to power just to retain power but to fundamentally change the political landscape of the power

corridor known as ‘Lutyens’ Delhi.’ The aftermath is equally important as to how he has attacked the existing power elite for not representing the new reality and, at times, for being against the national interest. He always held a grudge against the existing power elite for not being fair to the national cause and always sided with the ‘Nehru-Gandhi’ family. The phrases he used during his election campaigns and after too brings out his deep frustration with them.

Although, he himself was seen to be in cahoots with the business elites ‘Ambani and Adani’ which was attacked by Rahul Gandhi inside the parliament by calling his government as ‘suit-boot ki sarkar’. This charge had a huge impact on the perception of the current regime in public view. What followed was a flurry of populist initiative to shrug off this label. Its untrue that Modi did not try to win over the Delhi elite. Nevertheless, he followed the policy of hating them more. To quote Baru, “Modi wanted to be loved by the denizens of Lutyens’ Delhi, but he also love hating them”. Throughout his first term and then in the second term he never relented in attacking them on whatever occasion. It is important to understand who the elites are and they relate to the power?

### Who are the ‘Elites’?

Going into the conceptual world, Sanjaya Baru comes out with the existing field of democracy. One of the models of Democracy-Elitist Model, heavily relied for the purpose of identifying the core characteristics defining the elite in any society. Theoretically, two Italian scholars-Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto are credited with theorising the field of democracy with their elitist model. Sanjaya Baru too begins by referring to their definition of ‘elite’. For the purpose of identifying elites in India, Baru relies heavily on Michael Kalecki’s classification. As per Kalecki, it is not the top of the Indian society which comprises landlords and big businesses, exercising the real power. Rather, the intermediate class comprising ‘rich peasantry’, ‘small businesses’ and ‘professional middle class’, that had access to power through

the control of institutions of the state politically. This 'intermediate class', over a period of time, became an important marker of power wielder in India. This 'intermediate class', in India, is not the conventional elite coming from dominant caste and class. Subsequently, the developments happening in Indian polity and economy led to the rise of many new contenders of power. Here comes the peculiarity of India. Caste and language became the grounds for social and political mobilisation leading to the emergence of new power elites at the provincial level challenging the old elites. However, the new elites are missing from the economic and cultural landscape of the country. Referring to Mills, "[e]lite are those who have the most of what there is to have, which is generally held to include money, power, and prestige and control of the institutions that facilitate this." Further quoting him, "power elite are 'those political, economic and military circles which as an intricate set of overlapping cliques that share decisions having at least national consequences.'"

### Elite and Power

Elite and power are correlated. Elites are elites, because they possess the power to get things done, even if others are resisting it. Power has many dimension-social, economic, political etc. In India's case this brings to the fore the role played by caste and class in shaping the concept of elite and their subsequent dominance in all the fields of society. For instance, if we look at the caste composition of the traditional elite, they all are upper caste and come from the urban background. However, this changed too with the introduction of democracy, many new castes made their presence felt in the corridors of elite, though minimally.

Due to Green Revolution and later, emergence of identity politics, the caste and regional composition of Indian elite underwent some change. That change is reflected in new regional/provincial elite accumulating wealth and creating a new vistas of assertion of caste

identity, be it Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Maharashtra or Karnataka. First, there emerged 'middle level caste groups' owing to the changes brought in by the Green Revolution. Later, Mandal politics and Dalit assertion led to the rise of a new breed of politicians regionally and nationally. These politicians had political power and they used it to consolidate their position within respective states. It has been emphasised that wealth leads to power. On the contrary, Baru underlines through interesting anecdotes how the political power acquired using the institutions of state could lead to the accumulation of power. So, 'wealthier becoming powerful' and 'powerful becoming wealthier' holds true in the present context.

#### 'New India' and a Cultural Revolution

The arrival of Narendra Modi as the prime minister, a person coming from the middle caste, non-English background and having no wealth created unease for the traditional elite who enjoyed the patronage of the 'Nehru-Gandhi' family. These three characteristics define Indian elite according to Rammanohar Lohia. He lacked all the three. The dislike he has towards the elite identified with 'Lutyens' Delhi' often comes from the treatment he personally came to receive at the hands of these people. The 'Nehru-Gandhi' loyal elite is seen by him as an object of hate.

On the question of different power elites in India, Baru relies on Mills' categorisation, adding three other holders of power in contemporary India- bureaucracy, landed gentry, overseas Indians who have migrated to UK and US for better education and better job opportunity. There are landed class, businesses, military, who, conventionally, have been at the forefront in shaping the destiny of India. Land is an important source of power even today, however, the control and nature of possession has changed considerably due to many factors like urbanisation etc. Businesses have benefitted from aligning with the state. Baru gives a rich

account of different business groups which have played an important role in shaping India's economic policy right from pre independence period. State promoted 'cronyism' during the socialist era; later the post 1991 reform era too saw different business groups adopting different methods to get favourable policies made. Now, under the present regime, they not only influence government policy but also use these to promote what the government desires. The politicisation of military is a new phenomenon which will have far reaching consequences for the polity as a whole in the days to come.

Bureaucracy in India is deeply entrenched in the state structure. The structure has remained the same since the time it was created by the British. It has undergone tremendous changes in terms of its influence on national politics and policy making apparatus from the heydays to a state of being side lined completely. Modi has completely dominated the bureaucratic space by bringing his own bureaucrats from Gujarat to man different ministries and departments. This is something new. The interesting part of the evolution of Indian elite, is the emergence of what Baru calls, a 'globalised elite', comprising those people who have migrated to the US and UK or those planning to migrate. NRIs (Non-resident Indians) and OCIs (Overseas Citizens of India) constitutes an important segment which Modi has reached out, for support.

Overall, the new elite has come to adjust itself to the new realities. The difference between what it was earlier, during the 'Nehru-Gandhi' era and today is, Baru concludes, they were sought to be co-opted by the power welders, not anymore now. Today, Narendra Modi as the prime minister, seeks complete subservience of the elite to the grand idea of 'Hindutva'. This is a way to hegemonize all the spaces to the advantage of the current regime. Interestingly Baru is spot on when he prognosticates that this 'cultural' project of Hindutva could be another ploy to hide their inefficiencies and corruption and papering over massive inequality and poverty.

About the reviewer:

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