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THOUGHTSCAPES

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on

THE UNFINISHED QUEST: INDIA'S SEARCH FOR POWER STATUS FROM NEHRU TO MODI

by PROFESSOR T.V. PAUL

Hosted by:

**CHANAKYA POLICY &
RESEARCH FOUNDATION**

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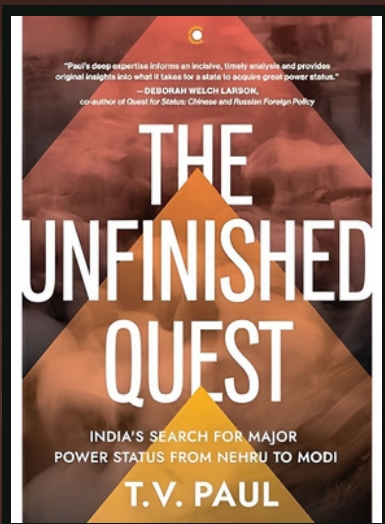


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INTRODUCTION

On February 9, 2025, the Chanakya Policy and Research Foundation (CPRF) hosted a compelling session centred on the book "The Uninished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi" by Prof. T.V. Paul. The session provided an indepth examination of India's historical struggles, strategic positioning, and contemporary challenges in attaining global recognition.

The event began with an introduction by Ms. Koushiki, General Secretary of CPRF, who set the stage for an insightful discussion by highlighting the signiicance of Prof. Paul's research and its relevance to India's global aspirations. The conversation explored key themes such as the importance of status in international relations, the challenges faced by emerging powers, and India's strategic manoeuvring in global politics. Participants gained valuable insights into India's diplomatic engagements, structural constraints, and future prospects in the international arena. This report encapsulates the essence of the discussion and provides insights into the critical themes explored during the session.

SPEAKER OVERVIEW

Prof. T.V. Paul is a distinguished scholar in international relations and one of the foremost experts on global power dynamics. He is the James McGill Professor of International Relations in the Department of Political Science at McGill University and the Founding Director of the Global Research Network on Peaceful Change (GRENPEC). With a prolific academic career spanning decades, Prof. Paul has authored and edited 24 books and published nearly 85 scholarly works on security studies, international order, and the rise of emerging powers.

A Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, Prof. Paul has significantly contributed to the study of geopolitics, particularly in understanding the role of status in international relations. As the 56th President of the International Studies Association (ISA), he has played a crucial role in shaping contemporary debates on global security and diplomacy. His latest book, *The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi*, provides a comprehensive analysis of India's long-standing efforts to attain great power recognition, examining the structural, historical, and strategic factors influencing its global trajectory.

SESSION HIGHLIGHTS

The session featured an insightful presentation by Dr. Rajiv Ranjan, who highlighted the book's significance and its contribution to the discourse on India's global aspirations. Dr. Ranjan described the book as a meticulously researched and timely work, offering valuable lessons for researchers and policymakers alike.

India's Strategic Challenges in Global Power Politics

One of the key discussions identified by Dr. Rajiv Ranjan revolved around the strategic dynamics between India and China. According to T.V. Paul, while the United States possesses external mobilisation capabilities and China excels in internal mobilisation, India lacks both, making its rise to great power status more challenging. The book also explores the concept of civilisational power, suggesting that while India's historical and cultural influence is significant, it is insufficient on its own to establish India as a global power. Professor Paul argues that India's status claims are often rooted in moral principles, yet morality alone is not a sufficient basis for international recognition.

The Three Responses to India's Rise

Dr. Rajiv Ranjan elaborated on Professor Paul's framework of how major powers react to rising states. According to the book, there are three possible responses: accommodation, denial, and indifference. While the United States has partially accommodated India's rise by recognising it as a major power, China remains largely indifferent or, at times, actively denies India's great power status. This underscores a broader status recognition dilemma, where India and China are engaged in a continuous struggle for influence and power in the global arena.

Yardsticks of Great Power Status

The discussion also touched upon the yardsticks of great power status. While India has made substantial progress in military capabilities, its limited presence in key international organisations remains a major obstacle. China, on the other hand, has successfully leveraged its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to build alliances and expand its influence. The United States, in response, has been creating platforms in the Indo-Pacific that are inclusive of India but exclusive of China. This dynamic demonstrates that global power recognition is shaped not by mere demands but by how others perceive and respond to a country's rise.

India's Emerging Role in Global Governance

Looking ahead, the book suggests that India's emerging role in global governance, as demonstrated by its leadership in platforms such as the G20 Summit in Delhi, could serve as an alternative to the UN Security Council (UNSC) in shaping the new world order. However, an important question remains: If India is to arrive at great power status, what role will it play in addressing global challenges? Professor Paul posits that India will need to take on greater collective responsibility, including tackling issues like global inequality and regional security.

Power-Sharing in Asia: India and China's Role

A particularly thought-provoking point raised by Dr. Rajiv Ranjan was the idea of power-sharing in Asia. According to Professor Paul, India and China should explore joint management of Asian security affairs, rather than engaging in direct rivalry. However, if India must share power in South Asia, the key question remains: How will it ultimately achieve recognition as a great power? This raises a fundamental dilemma in India's rise - whether collaboration with China will accelerate India's recognition or whether strategic competition is inevitable.

In response to the meticulous argument presented by Dr. Rajiv Ranjan, Prof. T.V. Paul delivered an elaborate presentation on his book, highlighting its key arguments and offering a nuanced perspective on India's evolving position in the international hierarchy. He examined the challenges India faces in gaining recognition, the strategic constraints it navigates, and the broader implications for its global aspirations. His insights provided a deeper understanding of India's foreign policy, its balancing act between major powers, and its pursuit of leadership in global governance.

The Importance of Status in International Relations

Status is a hierarchical concept where nations strive for recognition. It plays a crucial role in international diplomacy, affecting a country's trajectory, whether cooperative, conflictual, or accommodative. Examples from history, such as the rise of China and the US's strategic positioning, were discussed in this context, emphasising how nations engage in status competition and recognition struggles.

India as a Rising Power

India's growth post-liberalisation and its positioning in the global order were analysed. The discussion noted India's transition into a rising power following the 2009 financial crisis. The importance of US recognition in India's rise was underscored, along with the historical challenges India faced in gaining international recognition, including its exclusion from the United Nations Security Council in 1945. The evolving role of India in the global power structure was examined in light of these developments.

Defining Great Power Status

The speaker elaborated on the evolving definition of great power status. Initially, military power was the primary factor in defining a great power, but modern definitions now include economic strength, technological advancements, demographic advantages, and soft power. The interplay between hard power, which relies on coercion, and soft power, which leverages attraction, was highlighted, particularly in reference to India's leadership in international organisations. The importance of strategic diplomacy and global engagement was also emphasised in this context.

Challenges in Achieving Recognition

Emerging powers struggle to attain recognition due to resistance from established great powers seeking to maintain dominance. New powers often face difficulties in proving their legitimacy and worth. Institutional memberships, such as the UN Security Council, play a significant role in conferring status. However, gaining such recognition is challenging for emerging nations as global institutions remain influenced by historical power structures. This creates an ongoing struggle for countries like India to establish themselves as global leaders.

Internal and External Barriers to India's Growth

India faces multiple internal and external barriers to its growth. Internally, structural inequalities such as caste, class, and gender disparities pose significant challenges. The absence of a developmental state model has contributed to India's low human development rankings, while bureaucratic inefficiencies and status-driven governance further hinder progress. Externally, historical exclusion from critical international agreements, geopolitical challenges posed by China and Pakistan, and the reluctance of established powers to accommodate India in global governance structures continue to impede India's rise. These factors collectively influence India's ability to gain recognition on the global stage.

India's Strategy in Global Politics

India's foreign policy approach involves balancing relations with major powers, engaging with both the US and China while avoiding full alignment with either. India is expanding its regional influence by increasing its role in Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Economic and strategic initiatives, such as participation in BRICS and regional economic partnerships, have been instrumental in enhancing India's global standing. These efforts reflect India's aspiration to play a larger role in shaping global governance.

The Role of Domestic Politics

Domestic political narratives shape India's international aspirations significantly. The current leadership has focused on projecting India's global image, whereas opposition parties need to develop strategic global visions to remain relevant. The role of historical narratives in shaping contemporary political strategies was also considered in this context. Political leadership plays a crucial role in determining how India positions itself in the global arena and how it navigates status recognition challenges.

Future Prospects and Recommendations

Looking ahead, India must focus on human capital development to leverage its demographic advantage. A stronger strategic planning framework in international relations is necessary beyond reactive diplomacy. Addressing economic inequality is crucial for sustaining India's rise, and the country should develop a coherent vision for its role in the world order while actively contributing to global governance. Strengthening domestic institutions and fostering innovation will be key to maintaining India's upward trajectory.

Q&A SESSION

Question: How do you see artificial intelligence shaping the future of global power dynamics? Can AI be the next status transformation similar to nuclear programs?

Answer: India missed the first Industrial Revolution, and that contributed to colonisation and dominance by others. Before the Industrial Revolution, India's products were in high demand, contributing to 24% of the world economy. However, by the time the British left, it was less than 3%, partly due to British deindustrialisation policies. AI and emerging technologies are crucial, but India is currently benefiting only by being part of the Western ecosystem. Unlike China, India is not investing enough in its own AI innovations. The dependence on Western technology is risky, as access can be restricted. Like the supercomputer scenario, India needs to focus more on AI and emerging technologies independently.

AI is evolving so rapidly that it is difficult to comprehend its full impact. While some say it is overhyped, it is clear that certain technologies determine global dominance.

If India does not invest resources in AI research, it risks falling behind. The country has excelled in space technology, and a similar push is required for AI to ensure India's position in the technological race.

Question: India's demographic dividend is often cited as an advantage. However, given its education and employment challenges, could it become a liability?

Answer: The demographic advantage is a fleeting one. Over the next 20 years, India will have a significant working-age population, but after that, the population will begin to decline, as is already happening in China. This is where AI and automation could play a significant role in compensating for workforce reductions. India has not yet fully leveraged its demographic advantage due to inequalities in education and skills development. A segment of the population has access to quality education and opportunities, but many others do not, leading to large numbers of Indian students seeking education abroad. While many may return and contribute to India's growth, improving the domestic education system is essential.

Policies need to focus on education, job creation, and skill development. There needs to be greater collaboration with global universities and an openness to foreign scholars.

Job creation is also crucial—while India's economy is growing, it is not generating enough jobs for young people. The demographic dividend is an asset, not a liability, but only if harnessed through effective policymaking and investment in human capital.

Question: What is the nature of the rivalry between India and China in both material and normative domains? How do you see their competition evolving?

Answer: The rivalry between India and China has always had a normative aspect. From the very beginning, both nations had different visions for Asia. There were ideological and strategic clashes, particularly during the Cold War era, and today, their rivalry extends into multiple domains, including economic influence, regional leadership, and technological advancements. Balancing this rivalry is crucial. India and China occasionally cooperate through BRICS, but this partnership is facing challenges, especially due to US policies under leaders like Trump. The Trump administration's moves against BRICS, particularly in the currency domain, could create further disruptions in the global financial order. If BRICS fails to establish alternative financial mechanisms, the dominance of the US dollar will continue to shape international trade dynamics.

India's challenge is to maintain strategic autonomy while balancing relationships with both China and the US. If global polarisation intensifies, India will face greater pressure to align more closely with either bloc, which could limit its diplomatic flexibility. India's long-term strategy should focus on strengthening its scientific, technological, and economic capabilities to enhance its role in global affairs.

Question: How can individuals, particularly students and young professionals, contribute to India's progress at a grassroots level?

Answer: Individual contributions are crucial. Regardless of position, everyone has a role to play in national progress. Bureaucrats, for example, must focus on efficiency and ethical governance rather than bureaucratic delays and corruption. A shift in attitude is necessary—helping people, streamlining processes, and removing unnecessary obstacles are essential to India's growth. For students, the key is to excel in their respective fields and contribute to society in meaningful ways. Even small actions—such as maintaining cleanliness in public spaces, fostering a culture of responsibility, and engaging in community initiatives—can have a collective impact. India's development depends on both systemic improvements and individual responsibility. While patriotism is often expressed through slogans, real patriotism comes from actively contributing to the country's well-being.

Learning from global best practices, enhancing research and productivity, and fostering an attitude of service will be crucial in ensuring India's continued rise on the global stage.

CONCLUSION

The session with Prof. T.V. Paul provided a thought-provoking analysis of India's evolving quest for global recognition. By examining the interplay between status, power, and strategic diplomacy, the discussion illuminated the complexities of India's rise in the international order. From historical exclusions to contemporary challenges in global governance, Prof. Paul offered a nuanced perspective on the structural and strategic hurdles that continue to shape India's trajectory.

The Q&A session further enriched the dialogue, addressing critical issues such as the role of artificial intelligence in global power shifts, the significance of India's demographic dividend, and the enduring competition with China. Prof. Paul's insights underscored the need for long-term strategic planning, investment in human capital, and a recalibrate foreign policy that balances assertiveness with pragmatism.

As India navigates its path toward major power status, the discussion highlighted the importance of both domestic and international recalibration. The session reaffirmed that while external validation remains a key factor in status recognition, India's internal policy choices, institutional strength, and technological advancements will ultimately determine its place in the evolving global order.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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VISUALS/PHOTOGRAPHS







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