

***India in South Asia: Domestic Identity Politics and Foreign Policy from Nehru to the BJP.* By Sinderpal Singh. Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2013. Hardcover: 163pp.**

Singh's *India in South Asia* is a useful addition to the small but growing literature on Indian foreign policy for its theoretically sophisticated analysis, especially since the vast majority of writings on India's post-independence foreign policy are descriptive and historical. Furthermore, in sharp contrast to most of the theoretical literature that analyzes India's foreign policy from the Realist and/or Neo-liberal perspectives, Singh draws upon the critical theory approach of the Frankfurt School.

This book, which is based on Singh's doctoral dissertation, employs "critical discourse analysis" to analyse the three discourses of secularism, democracy and anti-imperialism in order to explain India's foreign policy with an emphasis on the politics of identity. Singh's central premise is that India's foreign policy can be better understood as a manifestation of India's identity that is articulated by its political elite in the context of the country's domestic politics. This is because the "manner in which these political elites conceive India's region and regional role depends upon their engagement with domestic identity politics" (p. 1).

More specifically, Singh looks at three periods since India's independence — the Nehru years (1947–62), the Indira Gandhi years (1966–77, 1980–84) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) years (1998–2004) — to study the impact of the three discourses of secularism, democracy, and anti-imperialism on Indian identity and therefore on foreign policy. Within each of these periods, Singh looks at two foreign policy cases. The first case involves India's approach towards Pakistan which is analysed for all of the three periods identified above. The second case involves India's approach towards Nepal during the Nehru years, towards Sri Lanka during the Indira Gandhi years, and towards Bangladesh during the BJP years.

The discourse analyses of secularism, democracy, and anti-imperialism during these three periods is a useful contribution to the literature as it shows how India's sense of self had an impact on India's foreign relations in the context of the different episodes mentioned above. For this reader, there are two important findings that emerge from Singh's study. Firstly, the author shows that by changing the discourse on Indian secularism (away from its

Nehruvian roots towards an arena of manipulation by the state) and by resorting to the politics of “democratic populism”, Indira Gandhi re-articulated India’s self-identity with serious consequences for India’s policies towards Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Secondly, Singh argues that the BJP was successful in recasting India’s discourse on anti-imperialism “to include notions of Muslim imperialism towards Hindu India” (p. 98) that were then used to interpret Pakistan’s actions in Kargil in 1999 and illegal Bangladeshi (Muslim) migrations into India.

Singh does not directly take on the issue of whether or not his identity-based approach provides a better explanation of these cases compared to the extant Realist and Neo-liberal arguments. Nevertheless, Singh’s book has enriched the debate on these issues.

However, there are at least two issues that are only partially addressed by Singh. Firstly, Singh starts his work by trying to understand how the three discourses of secularism, democracy, and anti-imperialism have influenced the Indian elites’ “conceptions of India’s regional space and regional role(s)” (p. 9). At the same time, he simply assumes that the “region” where India’s elites sought to express the foreign policies informed by such discourses on identity was South Asia as all of his episodes deal with South Asian cases. To be fair, Singh does acknowledge that India’s leaders have always sought to play a “global” role, especially during the Nehru years. But it is not clear why (or how) “South Asia” emerges as the “region” where the foreign policy dimensions of India’s domestic identity are most visible. After all, Nehru’s organization of the Asian Relations Conference in 1947 and his leading role at Bandung in Indonesia in 1955 meant that a larger “Asia” could also have been such a region. Did the variable of “power” that is ignored by Singh lead to the shrinking of India’s region from the “global” and the “Asian” to simply the “South Asian”?

Secondly, in the case on Nepal, Singh argues that Nehru transformed this relationship that had begun on an idea of “reciprocity” to one where India came to occupy a “special position” in Nepal’s foreign affairs (pp. 37–46). In as much as this shift was precipitated by the “Indian state’s increasing anxiety” (p. 42) towards the United States and China, it seems natural to ask yet again whether we can indeed leave “power” out of a complete explanation of foreign policy analysis. Furthermore, with India’s seemingly imperialistic approach towards its smaller Himalayan neighbours and although its domestic political discourse does not cast India in that role, can India’s thus

transformed its relationship towards Nepal as well as Bhutan and Sikkim (until the 1970s) not itself be viewed as such?

Singh is careful not to overstate his claim and he is forthright about this when he notes that his “premise is not that domestic identity-politics explains everything concerning the complexities of India’s foreign policy”, but only that “domestic identity-politics helps to explain important links between the domestic realm and foreign policy” (p. 2). The importance of Singh’s work lies in the theoretically informed “thick descriptions” of India’s foreign policy decisions that the more parsimonious explanations based only on power-centered variables gloss over.

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