

Alyssa Ayers, *Our Time Has Come: How India is Making its Place in the World* (New York: OUP, 2018), pp. 241, Price: Rs. 695.00.

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The book under review is written by Alyssa Ayers who has been privy to the rise of India since liberalisation and opening up of the Indian economy. It is a well written work consisting of eight chapters spread through three phases of ‘looking back’, ‘transition’ and ‘looking ahead.’ It encompasses interesting facets of how India has come out of morass of abject poverty and crisis of balance of payments to usher into an era of confidence, economic growth, stability, investment destination and prospects of being called upon to sit on the global ‘high table’.

The author has sought to provide her understanding and analysis of the ‘rise of India’ on the global map. She describes in an optimistic way the entire Indian foreign policy on the basis of India’s domestic capabilities. Besides, she reminds the readers about huge developmental challenges that India faces. As she observes: Many Americans do not yet realise the economic strength and strategic significance India has already acquired, though it still faces daunting developmental needs.... However, “India is steadily increasing its global involvement, with the ambition to be one among the major global powers.”

Ayers seeks to put forward the Indian view that by the strength of a majority that Prime Minister Modi has attracted the world leaders as they do see in him a person who can deliver on his promises. She opines that India now has “the first Indian leader in thirty years to win a single-party majority in national elections” and as a result the world is “looking at us with deference or as an equal”—resulted from the strength of his mandate.”

As a corollary to this observation, Ayers underscores limitations of the optimism especially due to the “domestic challenges India faces will not be overcome overnight, and it has many, spanning the entire range from infrastructure and economic reform to education, skills training and job creation, to managing the country’s great diversity, all the way to a stronger defense and national security capacity.”

With brevity, Ayers has put forward the crux of the Indian challenge: how to achieve high economic growth being saddled with thirty crores of poor people, education quality suffered badly because of reservation and population explosion, etc. On security front also the challenges are huge as no amicable solution is achieved yet on Indo-Pak conflict because Pakistan State Sponsored Terror continues to bleed India since the beginning of the Kashmir insurgency (1989). It has become worse as China supports Pakistan in spite of knowing that Pakistan has become a place that encourages terrorist groups by providing funds, weapons, training, etc. In this context the probability of a two-front war against India cannot be ruled out.

The author has enquired deep into Indian political history, analysed Nehru’s policies. She says: “despite the ups and downs of recent years, India has done comparatively well for itself and for its citizens, and that has helped boost its relative prospects at a time of great turmoil in the world.... His expansive vision, and the duration of his tenure, forged the country’s early institutions.... The practices he set in place for Indian diplomacy and its approach to the world had an outsized influence on the country’s foreign policy in the decades to follow.” Ayers also puts it well in terms of India’s immediate neighborhood when she says “Nehru’s specific imprimatur can clearly be seen in Indian foreign policy, and in how Indian citizens see their place in the world and the choices before them.”

Further Ayers says, “India can be quite forceful when it comes to the domestic politics of its smaller neighbors. India may steer clear of comment on Iraq and the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, but it will press firmly on Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Maldives, where it sees its security interests affected. Here, the non interventionism of nonalignment gives way to a clear Chanakyan realism within India’s own neighborhood. And again, all parties have displayed this preference equally.” She has relied upon realism while evaluating India’s actions in the neighbourhood, for instance, India’s involvement in Sri Lanka under Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by sending troops to Sri Lanka to ensure that the Chinese do not reach there.

The author also traces the genesis of Indian backwardness to the past and alludes to the Congress politician Shashi Tharoor's speech at the Oxford Union in 2015, in which he called for British reparations to India. As she observes: "At the beginning of the 18th century, India's share of the world economy was 23 percent, as large as all of Europe put together. By the time the British departed India, it had dropped to less than 4 percent.... By the end of the 19th century, India was Britain's biggest cash-cow, the world's biggest purchaser of British exports." This seems to be the context to possible role of the Indian economy in the world in as a throwback to "the loss of an earlier greatness that the West plundered." Ayers opines that since the Nehru's time "Permanent membership in the UN Security Council remains a primary focus for India's expectation that institutions of global governance should reform to reflect the world more equally".

According to new archival research drawing upon the correspondence between Nehru and his sister Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit—who led India's delegation to the United Nations and served as ambassador to the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s—the United States proposed that India to take the permanent seat in the Security Council. (This was during the debate within the United Nations for recognition of the People's Republic of China as the legitimate government to replace the Republic of China Nationalists in Taiwan). Nehru took the view that "we are not going to countenance it.... India, because of many factors, is certainly entitled to a permanent seat in the security council. But we are not going in at the cost of China." Ayers observes that the "Indian governments have repeatedly pressed for a larger UN role befitting India's size, its democracy, and what they see as its special moral role in the world. The case India makes for why it should occupy a permanent seat in a reformed Security Council rests on both the recognition of significant change in world politics over the past sixty years, coupled with India's sense of its own important contributions to the functions of the United Nations."

Similarly, the author points out another struggle India has waged in the face of stiff resistance from the nuclear-haves. She observes that "The decision to stay out of the NPT also left India outside nonproliferation regimes designed to reward treaty signers with technology, and punish non-signatories by its denial. For three decades, India decided to furrow a lonely path, despite the costs to its defense programs and its advanced technology development". The Clinton administration's every effort to convince India to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) by banning further nuclear testing came to naught. In 1996, India effectively torpedoed the agreement by refusing to sign; the country's then ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, the late distinguished diplomat

Arundhati Ghose, became famous for this defiance. After India's 1998 nuclear tests, extensive negotiations, conducted over "fourteen times at ten locations in seven countries" by then deputy secretary of state Strobe Talbott and then Minister of External Affairs Jaswant Singh, led USA to understand India's compulsions and positions. This engagement subsequently culminated in the George W. Bush administration's offer of a civil nuclear cooperation in 2005. India still has not signed the NPT, and it will not, but the world can now work with India on civilian nuclear energy.

On the issue of substantive performance of the Indian Economy, Ayers has taken a view that "Using another measure—purchasing power parity (PPP), which accounts for price differences across countries—India became the world's third-largest economy in 2011, surpassing Japan. As annual economic growth soared from 4 to more than 8 percent in the mid-2000s, crossing 10 percent by 2010, more than one hundred sixty million people moved out of abject poverty in the period from 2004-5 to 2011-2...." According to World Bank figures economic progress has moved India from a minor player on the international stage to a major one. The country's increased visibility has made Indian culture more familiar to Americans; Yoga is ubiquitous, and even Bollywood movies are getting popular. India's role as an emerging power and increasingly consequential actor on the world stage has happened in a less obvious and less discussed fashion. Ayers aptly describes this in the following words: "...In a world of low growth in the developed markets, India's large population and comparatively high economic growth rates have made it a crucial place to be for global companies, likely for decades to come."

It seems the growing profile and strength of the Indian economy and political stature has become an enabler to achieve strong position of the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change. Ayers has viewed this Indian posture positively that established Indian leadership in climate change though the United States has faltered and left behind.

Another strand of the Indian foreign policy Ayers has chosen to construe as Indian strength; quoting Fareed Zakaria, she has observed that "the world has new powerhouse economies now—China, and now India—which have grown large in the aggregate even while remaining comparatively poor. China's economic heft has given it the throw-weight to push what it wants either through inducements or assertiveness in a growing number of places around the world. India, by contrast, still lacks the deep pockets that have made Beijing a consequential sovereign investor, and it cannot necessarily determine global outcomes on its own".

The author has rightly felt that though India does remain ambivalent about pushing its own views, often preferring to remain quiet or offer carefully crafted positions, it aims not to offend anyone. Thus, 'caution' remains hallmark of the Indian foreign policy posture. That said, while India still remains far behind China in several respects, the days of India being seen as a overcrowded land of poverty are over. India's transition includes a self-belief that India's ascent to power on the global high table is well deserved considering its economic prowess, young population (work force), geostrategic location, strong democratic ideals and political stability. In fact, India has arrived in the world stage. In a 2015 speech delivered in Kuala Lumpur, Prime Minister Modi conveyed the arrival of India: "Now, it is India's turn. And we know that our time has come." This in fact did echo views expressed by his predecessor Manmohan Singh eight years ago. It is therefore, believed that it will realize its ambitions as a global power, likely in its own more cautious way, in the decades to come in a way that was unimaginable twenty-five years back.

Finally, the book is all about the process and transition of India making its place in the world. It is well researched, timely and rich in factual evidences supporting the prospects of the 'rise' of India that is often dubbed as 're-awakening of a giant'. Undoubtedly, Ayers has made a seminal contribution to knowledge on telling the story of India in her prolific and convincing style. It is an important reference for the world to view India's rise as global power in a very balanced way.