useful dissection of Indian decision making when asked to provide a military contingent in support of the US-led military intervention in Iraq.

The limitations of this volume notwithstanding, it is nevertheless a worthwhile attempt to address multiple dimensions of the grand strategy of a state that may yet play a critical role in shaping the global order in the twenty-first century. Perhaps it will encourage further discussion of the subject to the benefit of both theory and policy.

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Why would poor, socially marginalized people vote for a party run by—and for—a deeply entrenched social and economic elite? Thomas Frank’s What’s the Matter with Kansas? (Holt, 2005) asked a version of this question about the United States, where a striking proportion of working-class people supported a Republican Party that systematically advanced the interests of better-off Americans.

An Indian variant of this puzzle is the subject of Tariq Thachil’s Elite Parties and Poor Voters: How Social Services Win Votes in India. Thachil examines how and why the elite-dominated Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has attracted the votes of Dalits and Adivasis. What particularly interests Thachil is a method the BJP has used to cultivate support from these subaltern groups: delivering social services through party-affiliated, yet nominally independent, welfare organizations. Thachil regards the operation of these schools, clinics, and community centres in predominantly Dalit and Adivasi areas as a strategy to broaden the party’s appeal—one with parallels in other countries. He devotes part of a chapter on comparative cases to Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, which (like the BJP) was founded and dominated by elites, and which (also like the BJP) has developed a robust service-delivery apparatus. Both parties regard serving the poor as a religious obligation. Thachil notes the ideological difference between such “charitable” work and the emancipatory projects pursued by class-oriented parties. The most important distinction he draws, however, is between the work of the BJP’s privately financed service-delivery organizations and two conventional methods for attracting subaltern votes: clientelism (the selective distribution of state benefits to a party’s supporters) and a redistributive policy agenda. Clientelism has been of limited use to the BJP, Thachil claims, because the party has been out of power for most of its existence; a pro-poor policy platform is constrained by the preferences of the BJP’s elite core. Thachil deserves credit for identifying the private provision of “local public
goods” as a party-building strategy, and even more kudos for showing how it works and why it does not always produce the desired results. There is much else to praise in this book. Thachil’s prose is uncluttered, his methodological tastes omnivorous. The empirical material, which includes close scrutiny of welfare organizations in a number of states, is analyzed sensitively. Thachil deftly deploys the personal narratives of service workers to illustrate the subtle ways in which the teachers and health professionals who staff these BJP-linked organizations become opinion-shapers in the localities where they work: these individuals do not officially endorse candidates, but rather suggest to the people they serve which candidate is their own personal preference.

Thachil also makes good analytical use of comparisons between (and within) India’s states. The BJP’s divergent electoral fortunes in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, for instance, demonstrate how the viability of the BJP’s private-welfare-provision strategy is adversely affected by increased social-service expenditure by state governments. Thachil’s comparison between Chhattisgarh, Kerala, and Uttar Pradesh nicely captures how the strategies pursued by the BJP’s state-level rivals influences the party’s approach. He also takes time to explain outliers, such as Gujarat, where the BJP has experienced electoral success despite a relative shortage of party-linked service organizations.

One shortcoming of Thachil’s analysis stems from one of the book’s greatest strengths: the laser-like focus on advancing his claims. This leads Thachil, on occasion, to give short shrift to alternative explanations. He claims, for example, that the division of labour between the BJP and its affiliated service organizations has been dictated by a contradiction between the party’s elite core and the subaltern voters it seeks to attract. But are the BJP’s financial backers, and its largely upper-caste leadership, really so implacably opposed to pursuing elements of a pro-poor agenda? During the 2014 general election that brought it to power, the BJP’s manifesto promised merely to reform, rather than abolish, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), the previous government’s flagship welfare program. Some BJP-run state governments—e.g., Rajasthan in the 1980s and 1990s; Madhya Pradesh in the first two decades of the twenty-first century—pursued high-profile pro-poor programs. BJP stalwarts, in other words, may be more aware of the need to counter the party’s elitist image through programmatic adjustments than Thachil acknowledges. (His impressive review of BJP policy statements cannot, unfortunately, capture the complex reality of how the BJP governed in practice.) The BJP, in this sense, is not hugely dissimilar to the Congress Party, whose more progressive manifesto commitments in recent years have been driven by much the same political motivations. Both the industrialists who provide the bulk of the Congress’s funds, as well as the party’s leadership, itself drawn largely from one or another fragment of India’s variegated elite, have long regarded such policy accommodations as the cost of doing business.
Thachil may also underestimate the degree to which the BJP recruits subalterns through divisive rhetoric and provocative acts that target religious minorities and are designed to unite Hindu voters, regardless of caste, behind the BJP. Communal mobilization of this type—a classic of the BJP’s political repertoire—does not generally work with Dalits, Thachil contends, because subalterns tend to shun ideologies that legitimize and facilitate their oppression. Yet, in places where Dalits compete for jobs, housing, and services with members of religious minorities, or are employed by them, one cannot assume that Dalits are immune to the perceived psychic, and sometimes material, rewards that can accompany the persecution of another subordinated group. Dalits and Adivasis are also reported to have voted for the BJP in parts of Rajasthan as a result of private assurance that, once in power, the party would protect these vulnerable groups from locally dominant land-owning castes (of “intermediate” or “backward” status) that are often the most direct threat to Dalit and Adivasi well-being, including their physical security. The existence of such clientelist political arrangements, which because of their secretive nature are difficult to identify definitively, would undercut Thachil’s claim that private service-delivery, not patronage, was the main technique for luring subaltern voters to the BJP.

These criticisms do not detract from Thachil’s achievement. Indeed, they attest to the book’s ability to stimulate debate. *Elite Parties, Poor Voters* is a major contribution to our understanding of how India’s parties court the poor, and will be an invaluable resource for researchers examining these questions comparatively.

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**INDIA’S NORTH-EAST: Identity Movements, State, and Civil Society.**


Northeast India, home to a hundred ethnicities and mutinies, remains highly complex, yet poorly understood. The dearth of good quality writing on the region is only recently beginning to be rectified. This volume, a collection of earlier, mostly published works of the author dealing with ethno-nationalist struggles in Assam and Nagaland states, promises hope, but only just. The puzzle the author seeks to explain is that of “how Assam, with its centuries old relationship with the Indian sub-continent could give rise to a militant movement with distinct secessionist overtones” (viii). The volume is organized into four chapters: Roots of Alienation; Course and Character of Naga Struggle; Assam: Insurgent Movements and Identity Politics; and lastly, State and Civil Society in Northeast India, each containing a number of shorter pieces on the subjects at hand.