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Review of Jolita Zabarskaitė, *'Greater India' and the Indian Expansionist Imagination, c.1885–1965: The Rise and Decline of the Idea of a Lost Hindu Empire*

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JOLITA ZABARSKAITĖ, *'Greater India' and the Indian Expansionist Imagination, c.1885–1965: The Rise and Decline of the Idea of a Lost Hindu Empire*, *The Politics of Historical Thinking*, 4 (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2023), 429 pp. ISBN 978 3 110 98606 8. £72.50

Jolita Zabarskaitė's study is yet to receive the scholarly attention it deserves. As far as I can see, only two academic reviews of the book have been published to date.<sup>1</sup> This is surprising, since Zabarskaitė's is the first book-length exploration of 'Greater India', a theme that, since the publication of Susan Bayly's pioneering article of 2004,<sup>2</sup> has garnered a good deal of attention.<sup>3</sup> Greater India describes Indian intellectuals' framing of the discovery of ancient and medieval civilizational links between South Asia and East and South-East Asia. Previously contextualized as a species of 'interwar internationalism' and pan-Asianism, Zabarskaitė pushes the dating of this discourse back to the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the watershed of the Swadeshi movement (1905–8). This is one of the book's major contributions. The other is that Hindu nationalism, relegated to the margins by Bayly and others, emerges as the focal point of Greater India discourse in Zabarskaitė's account.

The book is divided into five chapters of hugely varying length. Chapter one explores how Indian scholars first learned and made sense of what they would later come to call Greater India. But as only seven pages are dedicated to the nineteenth century and only one

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<sup>1</sup> By Yorim Spoelder in *H-Soz-Kult*, 8 Jan. 2024, at [<https://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/reb-134252>], accessed 24 July 2024; and by Ana Jelnicar in *Anthropological Notebooks*, 30/1 (2024), S10–S13.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Bayly, 'Imagining "Greater India": French and Indian Visions of Colonialism in the Indic Mode', *Modern Asian Studies*, 38/3 (2004), 703–44.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Marieke Bloembergen, 'Borobudur in the Light of Asia: Scholars, Pilgrims, and Knowledge Networks of Greater India', in Michael Laffan (ed.), *Belonging across the Bay of Bengal: Religious Rites, Colonial Migrations, National Rights* (London, 2017), 35–56; Mark Ravinder Frost, "'That Great Ocean of Idealism": Calcutta, the Tagore Circle, and the Idea of Asia, 1900–1920', in Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal (eds.), *Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, Social and Political Perspectives* (New York, 2009), 251–79; Carolien Stolte and Harald Fischer-Tiné, 'Imagining Asia in India: Nationalism and Internationalism (ca. 1905–1940)', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 54/1 (2012), 65–92.

nineteenth-century work is discussed, it becomes obvious that the time span of 1885 to 1965 indicated in the book's title is somewhat misleading. The Swadeshi movement that jump-started mass protest against the British in the twentieth century and forced a nationalist reflection on the essence of Indian civilization is the real moment of departure for Greater India. The second chapter addresses the Bengali provincialism that flavoured the nationalism behind Greater India and provides a lengthy discussion of social scientist Benoy Kumar Sarkar's vision of it as a present-day geopolitical potentiality, rather than an 'antiquarian' pursuit (p. 128). The third chapter shows how the founding of the Greater India Society in 1926 – the focus of Bayly's account – was 'merely an institutionalization' of a long-present theme (p. 16). Clashing with and disinheriting other political and martial visions of conquest, the society reflected the noted scholar Kalidas Nag's vision of India's peaceful and non-political civilizing mission to South-East Asia. Chapter four details how the idea of Greater India became ubiquitous in Indian discussions in the 1920s and 1930s, to the point of forcing engagement even from Jawaharlal Nehru. It tracks protagonists of the discourse who travelled to 'Greater India', and discusses how the growing Indian diaspora was understood as a future Greater India. The fifth and final chapter treats what it frames as the 'decline, revival and afterlife' of the Greater India discourse. The 'revival' took the form of the Hindu nationalist party, the Hindu Mahasabha's fight for *Akhand Bharat* ('Undivided India') and against Partition and Pakistan, and Sarkar's 'Greater Bengal', which countered the partition of his homeland. 'Decline' refers to the period after independence, when Indian statecraft under Nehru refused to make India a Hindu state, and a quest for Asian cooperation necessitated a muting of parochial Greater India discourse. 'Afterlife' then pertains to the work of Greater India's ageing advocates.

The book was submitted as a PhD dissertation at Heidelberg University and, as far as I can see, was published unchanged. In Germany, only once a doctoral thesis has been published may its author claim the title of doctor. There are pros and cons to this approach. It ensures that scholarship is made promptly available to the academic community, but the quality may suffer. As a thesis, Zabarskaitė's work is impressive. As a book, it would have been improved by some

rigorous weeding and further conceptual digging. *'Greater India' and the Indian Expansionist Imagination* features a dizzying cast of figures, and at times it drowns in detail. This is to be expected from a PhD dissertation that needs to demonstrate diligence and completeness, but the book would have benefited from giving the conceptual claims more breathing space and carefully selecting what empirical evidence is needed to make its point.

In other words, the net is sometimes cast too wide. For instance, Zabarskaitė struggles to fit the Hindu nationalist fight for *Akhand Bharat* into the Greater India framework. Overlaps of actors between the Hindu Mahasabha and the Greater India discussion notwithstanding, even Zabarskaitė has to admit that *Akhand Bharat*, which seeks the political unity of the subcontinent, cannot really 'accommodate' the oceanic and far-flung 'Greater India' (p. 308).

Zabarskaitė convincingly demonstrates that an idea of the international was needed in order to construct a cohesive vision of the national in India. Yet 'nationalism' is wielded as a catch-all category in the book, whose slippage into Hindu nationalism is stated but not sufficiently examined. After all, as much as Indian nationalism tended to the Hindu idiom and was criticized for it by Muslim thinkers and politicians, Hindu nationalism also strained against All-India nationalism in significant ways. This introduces a fuzziness into the motivations behind Greater India. Zabarskaitė is careful to point out that competing visions of Greater India existed at the time, which can be roughly divided into India's 'cultural', that is, its benevolent civilizing mission – so different from Europe's violent history of conquest – and its political and military conquest of South-East Asia, very much like European (and, for that matter, British) colonialism. In the end, she privileges the cultural version, while pointing out its Hindu supremacism. But are the motivations behind these two visions really the same? After all, the conquest framing does something the cultural one does not: it makes a statement about sovereignty – a term almost absent from Zabarskaitė's account.

Indians seized on the prospect of Greater India to break free from British framings of India, which foregrounded its lack of national unity, national art, or a history of empire. Foreign (Dutch or French) scholarship was needed for legitimation purposes, but Zabarskaitė

convincingly shows—in what she herself describes as one of her book’s major interventions—that Greater India was not a derivative but an essentially Indian discourse. Consequently, the French Indologist Sylvain Lévi, who underpins Susan Bayly’s account, makes his first appearance in Zabarskaitė’s only on page eighty.

‘Even in their first versions’, writes Zabarskaitė, notions of Greater India were ‘linked to political arguments about potential presents and futures in India’ (p. 19). This is certainly true, and well demonstrated in the book. The last three pages gesture towards the ‘comeback’ (p. 390) of the concept and language of Greater India since 2014, when the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party first came to power in India, but they amount to little more than a teaser. Certainly, Greater India dovetails with Hindu nationalism’s supremacist vision and its attempt to rewrite (or ‘redress’) Indian history by writing Muslims out of it. Arguably, Hindutva (the ideology of Hindu nationalism) itself has an imperial texture. Readers interested in this topic should compare recent work by Arkotong Longkumer exploring the Sangh Parivar (the ‘family’ of Hindu nationalist organizations) and its mission of Hinduizing north-east India as an exercise in creating Greater India.<sup>4</sup>

Jolita Zabarskaitė’s study is a must-read for anyone interested in Indian and Hindu ideas of empire. More broadly, it is also of interest to scholars of Indian and Hindu nationalism and of the Indian Ocean world.

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<sup>4</sup> Arkotong Longkumer, *The Greater India Experiment: Hindutva and the North-east* (Stanford, CA, 2020).

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