

Shankar, Arjun. 2023. *Brown Saviors and Their Others: Race, Caste, Labor, and the Global Politics of Help in India*. Durham, London. Duke University Press. 360 pp. Pb.: \$29.95. ISBN: 9781478025092

Book review by

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In *Brown Saviors and Their Others*, anthropologist Arjun Shankar critically examines India's help economy, juxtaposed against a broader analysis of racialized capitalism, neoliberalism, and neo/postcolonialism. He develops an analysis of the "brown savior" to apply to a growing network of savarna (belonging to one of the four castes in the Hindu varna system) elites who utilize their social capital and caste privilege to help those less fortunate than themselves. Through the analysis of the brown savior, he reveals the neo-colonial capitalist regimes, racialized global histories, and graded caste stratifications that have shaped, and continue to shape, the economics and politics of help work in India and, arguably, in other brown contexts. This analysis allows readers to understand how and why specific elite actors emerge as saviors in a postcolonial context. This book can be useful to scholars and students of anthropology and development, South Asian studies, as well as practitioners who are keen to redefine help, in global help economies. Students of ethnography would also benefit from the book.

Shankar sets out to study the operations and practices of an education NGO, Sahaayaka, working in the southern state of Karnataka. Sahaayaka was one of the many NGOs that arose during the NGOization of India's voluntary sector, increasingly so during economic liberalization in the late 1980s. Sahaayaka's practice entailed using motivational techniques in schools to encourage children to study through the help of fieldworkers called mentors. The author finds that Sahaayaka as an organization, and its leadership, reproduce and uphold colonial racial ideas through their work in humanitarianism, development, and poverty-alleviation efforts—or what Shankar calls "help economies"—as well as through its organizational structure. In the rest of the book, Shankar examines

systems of power that produce brown subjects in postcolonial contexts, analyzing material histories, power asymmetries, and racialized and casteized relationships that link all NGO stakeholders, from transnational leaders to grassroots fieldworkers to the beneficiaries or targets of help work who are the students.

One of the highlights of the book is Shankar's methodology. He describes it as nervous ethnography, with a "twitchy, worried, agitated energy" (p. xii). In academic research, scholars should, in theory, shy away from bringing nervousness to their methodologies, as nervousness is unsettling. However, Shankar embraces nervousness, and anthropology provides the appropriate conduit to incorporate nervousness in his analysis of help economies. Tremendously honest and hyper-reflexive, Shankar's methodology is a potent tool through which he weaves his narrative, but equally, he turns the lens on the anthropological gaze itself—questioning it, critiquing it, and engaging with it. Shankar's reason for penning the ethnography is compelling in its call for "post-colonized scholars" to deal with the "difficult task of understanding their role in maintaining global caste and white supremacy" (p. xvi).

The chapters of the book are divided into four parts, which, as per the author, can be read independently. The prose combines narrative and analytical styles, favoring the latter. Through careful analyses of neocolonial, urban, and digital saviorism, Shankar lands on a conclusion that tries to reframe global help economies by acknowledging its entrenchment in global racial and caste capitalist systems. For instance, Shankar questions whether "primordial" (p. 9) closeness to, and knowledge of, the native land attributes a special ability to connect with said land and its people. This question lends weight to Shankar's analysis of the contradiction between Sahaayaka's mentors and savarna brown saviors, drawing much-needed attention to racialized caste capacities for affective labor and the broader implications of racialized evaluations of certain types of skill and knowledge in a help economy. In a particularly insightful moment, Shankar makes connections between masculinity and the rational work of brown saviors and femininity and the affective work of mentors, rendering the latter "less valuable" (10). In the end, he asks readers to go beyond popular discourses of help economies and annihilate extant racial, capitalist, and neocolonial systems in a quest for radical reimagination. This attention to epistemology is one of the key takeaways from the book and is timely, given India's current socio-political and economic context.