

***India's Eastward Engagement: From Antiquity to Act East Policy.* By S.D. Muni and Rahul Mishra. London and Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2019. Hardcover: 348pp.**

It is said that the best work is usually one that is done in the pursuit of truth, or in the case of this book, the solid reiteration of the truth. The authors, S.D. Muni and Rahul Mishra, both experts in Indian and Southeast Asian affairs, trace the history of India's eastward engagement from antiquity to the present time, which culminates in the reinvigorated Act East Policy (AEP) announced by Prime Minister Modi in 2014. The book highlights important indices of India's dynamic political behaviour and all aspects of Indian statecraft with respect to the East, flawed or otherwise.

The authors begin with an insightful introduction into how India perceives the East and the important civilizational exchanges and cultural diffusion that have taken place over millennia between the two places. The introduction also provides a clear outline of the book's main themes. Despite the elaborate historical recount, there is a clear focus on India's foreign policy and the country's engagements with East and Southeast Asia. The coverage of the three initial "waves" of India's eastward engagement and the "Indianization" of Southeast Asia not only serve as a chronological background to the study, but also contextualize the cultural similarities and the Indian diaspora present in Southeast Asia today.

The account of the three waves of history is especially fascinating as it chronicles the first signs of India's interaction with the East, which occurred as early as prehistoric times. The authors skilfully highlight Hindu and Buddhist influences which are considered the first wave. In fact, in the case of East Asia, India's engagement began with the Buddhist wave. The spread of Islam to Southeast Asia, the second wave, was facilitated by regional Muslim kingdoms in southern India, particularly along the Malabar Coast. Thus, these two waves are actually the origins of the Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia. The third wave, orchestrated by the British colonial authorities, was more deliberate and purposeful. Britain sent millions of Indians to its Southeast Asian colonies as plantation and mining workers. This third wave made possible the emergence of the links between India's political elite and the leaders of countries in the East struggling for independence, and paved the way for the camaraderie that characterized the many amicable relationships between the leaders of these countries in the succeeding decades.

The chapter on the “Nehru Wave” is by far, in this reviewer’s opinion, the best. Muni and Mishra elucidate on Nehru’s “eastward” successes and failures with care and precision. They also explore in detail Nehru’s leadership and its impact on India’s relations with its eastern neighbours. He was a charismatic leader, and, in many ways, an idealist. What stands out in this chapter is the subtle focus on the psychological dynamics underlying the Nehru-led eastward engagement, particularly the lasting impacts of these psychological processes on India’s engagement efforts. For instance, Nehru’s strong personality, characterized by his tendency to take the lead and strive for excellence, had rather insidious consequences when it came to engaging with his Southeast Asian counterparts. The tempestuous relationship between Nehru and Soekarno was also a major reason for the subsequent failure of India and Indonesia to engage in any meaningful cooperation. This book would hence appeal to readers who seek to understand the role of individual behaviour and leadership in international relations, as well as the relevance of misperceptions, biases and prejudices.

The chapters that follow cover India’s eastward engagement after Nehru’s premiership. The authors detail the various policies that India has adopted towards building ties with Southeast Asian states, especially efforts to rehabilitate its strained relations with some Southeast Asian countries at that time. While eastward engagement under Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri was relatively tepid, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi later had her work cut out for her, as she had to establish relations with the newly formed ASEAN while handling numerous issues of national importance and maintaining India’s international relevance in a changing world.

The evolution of the Look East Policy (LEP) under Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao in the early 1990s is clearly explained by the authors. In describing the domestic and international contexts within which the LEP was adopted, the authors deserve credit for their systematic analysis of both the formulation and eventual implementation of the LEP, which began with a central focus on ASEAN.

In the chapter dedicated to the AEP, the authors seek to comprehend and evaluate whether the modification of the LEP to the AEP was necessary and justified. Under the AEP, India broadened its horizon to include its extended neighbourhood in the Asia-Pacific region. The policy further emphasized the people-to-people links, which essentially reaffirms the relationships and ties that have existed for generations. According to the authors, the AEP can

best be understood as a repackaging of the LEP in order to reassure its regional neighbours that India was committed to the policy of eastward engagement.

Muni and Mishra's book is a fitting response to the criticism that India has not done enough to nurture its relationship with the East. In fact, the book highlights the important reasons why India's relationship with the East has had its frequent highs and lows, and how the latter have not always been India's fault. The authors' take on the challenges of deeper and wider engagement, especially with regard to the idea of an Indo-Pacific, has a lot to do with India's commitment to its steady and sustained economic growth. As pointed out by the authors, parallels can be found between India's approach to the Indo-Pacific and Nehru's premonition that the Euro-Atlantic region would eventually decline and that this would elevate the Indo-Pacific's importance with India as a major driver and stakeholder.

India's Eastward Engagement is an eclectic and engaging piece of work that will greatly appeal to readers because of the authors' ability to raise and then answer relevant questions about an important aspect of contemporary Indian foreign policy. The authors should consider continuing the study beyond the AEP and look into the initial stages of the Indo-Pacific cooperation.

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