

The
Mango
Flavour

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The Mango Flavour

India and ASEAN After a Decade
of the Act East Policy

GURJIT SINGH

ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK
INSTITUTE

First published in Singapore in 2025 by
ISEAS Publishing
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614
E-mail: publish@iseas.edu.sg
Website: <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

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ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Gurjit Singh (Ambassador), author.

Title: The Mango Flavour: India and ASEAN After a Decade of the Act East Policy / by Gurjit Singh.

Description: Singapore : ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2025. | Series: ASEAN Studies Centre Series ; no.18 | Includes index.

Identifiers: ISBN 978-981-5203-98-1 (soft cover) | ISBN 978-981-5203-99-8 (ebook PDF) | ISBN 978-981-5306-00-2 (e-pub)

Subjects: LCSH: ASEAN. | Southeast Asia—Foreign relations—India. | India—Foreign relations—Southeast Asia. | Southeast Asia—Foreign economic relations—India. | India—Foreign economic relations—Southeast Asia.

Classification: LCC DS525.9 I4G97

Cover design by Lee Meng Hui

Index compiled by Raffaele Nahar

Typesetting by International Typesetters Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

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Preface

I served as India's ambassador to Indonesia and ASEAN from 2012 to 2015. This was among my final assignments, before I moved briefly to Germany thereafter.

Before Indonesia, I had served in Japan, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Ethiopia, Italy and Germany. Indonesia, my only Southeast Asian posting, is uniquely positioned between South and East Asia with a fascinating history. My Indonesian posting varied from my two assignments in Japan, two in Africa and two in Europe, as I held concurrent accreditation as India's ambassador to ASEAN, becoming the last person to do so. In my final months in Jakarta, India set up a dedicated mission to ASEAN, marking a significant shift in how this important relationship was institutionally managed.

My period in dealing with ASEAN included witnessing the following key events: the 20th anniversary celebrations of the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit in 2012 and its attendant events; the inception of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations; the establishment of the ASEAN Communities; the challenges in the South China Sea from robust Chinese activities; and the launch of the Act East Policy in 2014.

As ambassador to ASEAN, I had to travel to countries outside Indonesia, such as Cambodia, Brunei, Myanmar and Vietnam, for ASEAN meetings. This experience gave me the opportunity to deal with a regional organization, which has countries which seem alike, yet often with different perspectives, just like currents in a warm sea.

I was the first Indian diplomat to be accredited to two separate regional organizations, having earlier been the representative of India to the African Union, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) when I was ambassador to Ethiopia during 2005–9. Thus, I am fascinated by regional institutions because they allow countries the opportunity to achieve more than what they could do by themselves. But they are often not a stepping stone for individual countries to go off on their own.

During my period in dealing with ASEAN, I always looked at what the ASEAN community-building process was seeking to achieve, and whether the member states would pursue ASEAN's policies. I am also curious about what stage ASEAN centrality would transform to greater ASEAN responsibility.

Why the Mango Flavour?

Any visitor to India or Southeast Asia will undoubtedly encounter the mango—an iconic fruit deeply rooted in the cultural and culinary traditions of both regions. Mangoes are widely cultivated and loved in Southeast Asia, with countries like Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines producing sweet, juicy varieties such as “Chok Anan”, “Harumanis” and “Sala”. In fact, the mango is the national fruit of the Philippines. While today mangoes are grown globally, their origins trace back to the Indo-Burma region, with India boasting a history of mango cultivation that spans over 6,000 years.

Mangoes are classified into two genetically distinct populations: the subtropical Indian group and the tropical Southeast Asian group. India, the world's largest mango producer, offers an incredible range of varieties like Alphonso (Hapus), Kesar, Dasher, Langra and Banganapalli—each with its unique flavour, texture and aroma. Indian mangoes are typically nonembryonic, while Southeast Asian varieties are often polyembryony, contributing to their distinctive characteristics.

For Indians, their mangoes are unmatched in taste and tradition. Similarly, people across ASEAN take immense pride in their local varieties. Between these preferences lies the opportunity to celebrate a

diversity of flavours under one shared symbol—the mango. Despite their genetic and taste differences, mangoes unite these regions through shared appreciation and cultural significance.

In Bahasa Indonesia and Malay, the mango is known as *Mangga*, symbolizing not only a fruit but also a flavourful connection between India and Southeast Asia that continues to ripen with mutual respect and admiration.

The mango is called the King of Fruits, but it is difficult to cultivate. It requires particular care while growing, snipping and shipping, and it can be very expensive.

In many ways, the India-ASEAN relationship reminds me of the mango and its unique flavour. Just like it is difficult to cultivate the relationship with ASEAN, the mango must be dealt with carefully to prevent it from overripening. You may face an overwhelming flavour of the ASEAN way. But it is only when you get used to it, would you be able to enjoy the tasty fruit!

The mango is an unstated symbol of contradictions and human preferences, which need to mesh for a real enjoyment. The India-ASEAN relationship is perhaps such a manifestation in regional relationships. The time is nigh to overcome the anxiety of the aroma and bite into the fruit to get a healthy taste.

For this reason, this book is titled *The Mango Flavour* as the mango seeks adjustment, accommodation and acceptance to overcome the challenges to attain a good taste.

My earlier books—*The Abalone Factor: An Overview of the India-Japan Business Relations*; *Masala Bumbu: Enhancing the India-Indonesia Partnership*; *The Injera and the Paratha: Enhancing the Ethiopia-India Relationship*—often had food flavours in their titles. I trust that this book will provide food for thought as India and ASEAN plough a new field for enhancing cooperation through their contiguity.

Acknowledgements

My interaction with friends and colleagues in ASEAN left me indelible memories. I remain in contact with these friends, despite many of us having retired. I thank several of them for their interaction and advice while writing this book. I also wish to thank my friends in the ASEAN Secretariat, in the foreign ministry of several ASEAN countries, both past and present ASEAN ambassadors in New Delhi, as well as my Indian colleagues and interlocutors.

I am particularly grateful to Professor SD Muni for his advice and guidance. I also benefitted from the inputs of Dr Prabir De, the head of the ASEAN-India Centre in New Delhi; Professor Shankari Sundararaman from the Centre for Indo-Pacific Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU); the Indian Embassy to ASEAN; and the Indo-Pacific Division at the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), India.

I wish to thank Dr Harish Mehta of the *Rising Asia Journal*; Dhruva Jaishankar of the Observer Research Foundation (ORF); Rohan Mukherjee; and many others who may forgive me if I omit to mention their names. I also thank the ORF, Eurasian Times, Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) and the Gateway House for permission to use essays that I had previously written for them. These are duly acknowledged at the relevant places.

For the survey on the Indians' perceptions of ASEAN in this book, I would like to thank Raisa Lorraine Palatty whom I met during a lecture at the Kautilya School of Public Policy and who volunteered to help me

with conducting the survey. The survey would not have been half as effective without her support.

I also wish to thank my old friend and former Indonesian minister Dr Dino Patti Djalal, the founder of the Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia (FPCI), and his team, especially Jenny Winata, for conducting the FPCI survey among ASEAN people on India.

I dedicate this book to my paternal grandparents. My paternal grandfather, Dr Harbans Singh, was a medical doctor from King Edward Medical College (now University) in Lahore in 1924. He served in difficult places in India and finally in Kandahar. I never had the opportunity of meeting him, but I remember him in my thoughts and dedicate this book to him. My knowledge of Dr Harbans Singh was mainly through my paternal grandmother, Shrimati Kaushalya Devi, who witnessed so much turbulence in her personal and political life, from the Partition of India to living as a refugee. She educated her children to become officers in the service of India. Her sacrifice is never too great. This dedication is a small token of my respect for my paternal grandparents.

This book serves to bring forth some unconventional ideas and tries to live by the ASEAN shield when everybody has drawn their swords. Using the multifaceted Act East Policy, will this shield be effective and can India give it greater strength and perseverance for a better life for the people in India and the ASEAN countries?

Abbreviations

ACD	Asia Cooperation Dialogue
ACMECS	Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy
ADMM-Plus	ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus
AEM	ASEAN Economic Ministers' Meeting
AEP	Act East Policy
AFTA	ASEAN Free Trade Area
AHSWG	ASEAN Highways Sub-Working Group
AIBC	ASEAN-India Business Council
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
AIMMAF	ASEAN-India Ministerial Meeting on Agriculture and Forestry
AISTDF	ASEAN-India Science and Technology Development Fund
AITIGA	ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement
AITISA	ASEAN-India Trade in Services Agreement
AMM	ASEAN Ministerial Meeting
AMS	ASEAN member states
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
APSC	ASEAN Political-Security Community
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BBIN	Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal Initiative

BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
CBM	Confidence-Building Measure
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia
CMEC	China-Myanmar Economic Corridor
CoC	Code of Conduct
CORPAT	Coordinated Patrol
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
CPR	Committee of Permanent Representatives
CTTC	Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime
DFI	Development Finance Institution
DOC	Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea
DONER	Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region
DP	Dialogue Partner
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
EAMF	Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum
EAS	East Asia Summit
EC	European Community
EWG	Experts Working Group
FOIP	Free and Open Indo-Pacific
FPC	Five-Point Consensus
IORA	Indian Ocean Rim Association
IORARC	Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation
IPEF	Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity
ISA	International Solar Alliance
LEP	Look East Policy
MGC	Mekong-Ganga Cooperation
NER	North Eastern region
NPCI	National Payments Corporation of India
NSA	National Security Adviser
ONDC	Open Network for Digital Commerce
PII	Private Impact Investor

PLI	Production Linked Incentive
P2P	People to People
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
ROK	Republic of Korea
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SAGAR	Security and Growth for All in the Region
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SCRI	Supply Chain Resilience Initiative
SCS	South China Sea
SEANWFZ	Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone
SOM	Senior Officials' Meeting
SSE	Social Stock Exchange
TAC	Treaty of Amity and Cooperation
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
ZOPFAN	Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality