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**Book Review on S. D. MUNI AND RAHUL MISHRA- “INDIA’S EASTWARD ENGAGEMENT: FROM ANTIQUITY TO ACT EAST POLICY”, NEW DELHI: SAGE PUBLICATIONS, 2019, PP. 348, ₹ 995, ISBN: 9789353282684**

By

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The book India’s Eastward Engagement: From Antiquity to Act East Policy, co-authored by S. D. Muni and Rahul Mishra, is a holly book for those scholars and students who want to know the in-depth historical evolution of India’s Act East Policy. Professor S.D. Muni is a well-known scholar in the field of International Relations. Dr. Rahul Mishra is an emerging scholar in this field too. This book is divided into seven chapters. Unlike most of the existing literature, this book adds a new historical discourse in India’s relations with its immediate eastern neighbour and far-flung countries.

This book traces the idea of India’s eastward engagement since ancient times. This engagement has been happened and moulded through civilizational exchanges, cultural diffusion, economic aspirations, and strategic locations. It mentions the religious spread of Buddhism and Hinduism. The Hindu’s religious’ epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata are widely known in Southeast Asian Countries. Most of this region’s countries’ scripts have their roots in Sanskrit and Pali. Many of the individuals’ names also continue to remain Sanskritized.

Authors analyse the extent and process of Indian civilizational expansion and cultural mingle in Southeast Asia into broadly three schools. The term ‘Southeast Asian’ was first used by an American Pastor Howard Malcom in 1839 in his book entitled Travels in South-Eastern Asian. French and Dutch historians lead the first school. They were closely followed by Indian historians, especially those who organized themselves as greater India Society. The second school is represented by scholars like Jacob Van Leur, who challenge the one-way diffusion process through Indian culture. The third school emerged with the debate of India’s cultural diffusion in this region. Indian Historians like G.C. Pande have lately accepted this school.

The authors divided India’s engagement with the East into seven distinct phases in this book. Such an appropriate classification is not available in most of the works in this field. The first wave is represented Ancient Hindu-Buddhist influence, the second-Islamic wave, the British era as a third, the fourth was is represented by the Nehruvian era. The post-Nehruvian period is considered fifth, Look East Phase as Sixth, followed by the Act East Policy as the latest phase, the seventh wave.

They also mention the role of Indian leaders like Subhas Chandra Bose, who brought the link with Japan, Singapore, and other Southeast Asian countries during the freedom movement against British Colonialism. This creates more historical connections, especially with Japan. The decedents of Japanese Freedom Fighters who lost their lives during the Second World War come and offer prayers every year in War Memorials in Manipur. They have also constructed a war memorial hospital in Manipur.

The authors mentioned the fundamental relationship of India and other countries of Asia started with the Asian Relations Conference, 1947. Under the leadership of Nehru, the India Council of Cultural Relations was established in 1949 to promote cultural ties with foreign countries. The Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, also called Bandung Conference held in 1955, can be considered the peak of India’s multilateral diplomacy, especially concerning India’s eastward engagement. But the authors analysed the setback of this conference during the Sino-India War in 1962. The border conflicts mainly with China and Pakistan shattered Nehru’s idealistic view of world politics. After the loss of this war, Nehru’s Pan-Asian idea and respect of India across the globe diminished.

The authors extensively discussed India’s role and support for the Burmese freedom struggle. Even during the drafting of its constitution, India sent constitutional expert Sir B.N. Rau. The Burmese government also offers to help India while dealing with the internal security challenge of the Naga insurgency in the North Eastern Region of India. Even though Nehru created Nagaland as a separate state, some sections of Nagas continue to remain on the fringe, and its deep-rooted multi-problems still await a peaceful constitutional and credible long-lasting resolution.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in 1967. India has been established a smooth relationship with it since its inception. India’s clear-cut support for ASEAN started explicitly in 1973 when its adoption of the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality. Recently India-ASEAN signed an agreement on Trade in Goods and Services in 2015. We have multiple bilateral and multilateral agreements with ASEAN and its members. India also strategically shifted its foreign policy towards



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this region after the Cold War. India has played as one of the leading players in security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region. But China does not favour such kind of Indian activity in this region. The maritime security of this region also provides strategically calculated moves from the Indian side. The authors also mention the role of the USA, which was eventually helpful to India.

S.D. Muni and Rahul Mishra discussed the main characteristics of Act East Policy. Yet, the Government of India still does not declare the clear-cut objective of this policy in the public domain. The up-gradation of Look East Policy which was initiated in 1991 to Act East Policy in 2014, is more continuity than change. This change is more on the quantitative than qualitative side. They also mentioned the debates on which year this policy started. The central government acknowledged the importance of North East region since 1971 as it established North East Council. Later on, in 2004, the Ministry of Development of North East Region became a full flagged ministry from department level. This region becomes a gateway for ASEAN connection with India. The then MEA Sushma Swaraj explicitly described the North East Region as a “natural partner” in India’s Act East Policy and a “land bridge” to ASEAN with this policy as “a means to strengthen the stability and economy, and prospects of our North East Region.”

The authors extensively analysed the different dimensions of challenges and engagement drivers towards Southeast and East Asia throughout the book. They also discussed the centrality concept of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) through India’s relationship with the Indo-Pacific region’s countries. The role of other regional organisations like the Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Initiative for Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Initiative, projects like India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway are also discussed at great length. They acknowledged that India’s delivery deficit and failures in delivering on promises are a severe weakness in India’s eastward engagement.

This book provides well organised historical evolution. It presents India’s odyssey towards the East world through multi-disciplinary approaches. They have analysed India’s foreign policy approach with a pragmatic view to date. But they either missed or overlooked the study of fear psychosis of the Northeast communities in terms of ethnic identities. The issue of narcotic nexus among militants, politicians, and security personals. Overall, the authors have provided a glimpse of India’s eastward policy, which is sensitive and accommodative.