
Book Review

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Amitav Acharya, *Civilizations in Embrace—The Spread of Ideas and the Transformation of Power India and Southeast Asia in the Classic Age*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2013, pp. Xv+88, US\$ 32.90.

The fact that ideas contribute in shaping the socio-political milieu of a country is beyond doubt. Over centuries, increased flow of trade and smooth movement of people and ideas across the world has led to shaping up of the very nature of the countries across the world. The role of ideas in history and international relations is increasingly becoming subject matter of scholarly debates. As one of the prominent scholars working on the theme, Professor Amitav Acharya has attempted to gauge the role of Indian ideas in shaping socio-cultural and politico-religious nature of the Southeast Asian region. The work is also a substantial contribution to the academic works on India–Southeast Asia relations, which has also been a matter of scholarly deliberations, particularly in the last one decade. India has been looking ‘East’ for the past several decades and now poised to ‘Act East’. However, India’s linkages with Southeast Asia are no less than two millennia old. History suggests that India is arguably the only country in the world that has impacted the history, culture, religion and civilisation of the Southeast Asian region in such an enormous manner. For instance, Buddhism travelled to Thailand from India during the rule of King Asoka. The presence of Indian Diaspora in Myanmar dates back to nineteenth century. As far as other countries are concerned, India has had long association with Bali (Indonesia), Malaysia, Singapore (earlier part of Malaya) and Vietnam. For instance, linkages with the land that is now known as Singapore date back to the fourteenth century when Singapore was used as a link in India–Southeast Asia trade. It is in this context, the title of this succinct work, by Professor Acharya, itself conveys the overall theme of the book, which is titled ‘Civilization in Embrace-The spread of Ideas and the Transformation of Power India and Southeast Asia in the Classic Age’ focussing on the fundamental idea that Asian civilisations have been engaging each other more through communicational strategies and involved less in conflicts. The time span under study deals with the ancient times, which is also referred to as the *Classical Age*.

The study, as Acharya puts it, is inspired by an interest to broaden our understanding of how ideas influence international relations in general and India–Southeast Asia relations in particular. The objective of the book, as mentioned by Acharya himself, is to ‘advance the case for considering alternative models of diffusion of ideas and cultures in world politics through one of the most extensive examples of the spread of ideas in the history of civilisation; and the diffusion of Indian religious and political ideas to Southeast Asia before the advent of Islam and European Colonialism’. (p. viii)

The book, which targets the broader circle of readers interested in interactions between India and Southeast Asia, aims to contribute to the debate surrounding dialogue among civilisations and the ways and means through which they interact, particularly in the Indian context. The book, undoubtedly, does fairly well in meeting its objective.

The main theme of the book revolves around the idea that it is not always necessary for different civilisations to clash with each other in order to influence each other and demonstrate their power regionally and globally. Civilisations too can coexist and in fact, have coexisted peacefully. The case study of India's relationship and interactions with Southeast Asia is a classic and irrefutable example. Thus, the work under review offers a fresh perspective on India's interactions with Southeast Asia between the first and the second millennium, and also attempts to add a contrasting dimension to the 'Clash of Civilizations' theory and deconstructs the idea of pre-eminence of power politics in civilisational exchanges. Thus, in contrast to Samuel P. Huntington's thesis, Acharya argues that 'when civilisations meet, they do not necessarily clash, but can cohabit and cooperate. They do not compete, but can learn from each other' (p. 3). However, it may be added that even in such cases, cultural superiority of one representative culture over the other plays a big role. Acharya argues that diffusion of ideas can occur even without the conflicts and the games of power politics. Thus, seemingly taking a cue from Charles Tilly's statement that 'war made the state' in Modern Europe, Acharya argues that 'ideas made the state in classical age' in general and Southeast Asia in particular.

A fascinating feature of the book is the photo section, which includes pictures taken by the author during his visits across several ancient cities across Southeast Asia, which in turn makes a significant portion of his work a first-hand experience. The ones worth mentioning include Cambodia, Java (Indonesia), Vietnam and Myanmar.

Acharya's work is an attempt to answer a few under-researched questions pertaining to India's influence over the Southeast Asian region across millennia. Analysing politico-cultural interactions through the lens of local initiative, localisation and convergence, Acharya has demonstrated that the process of such encounters can be pacific, and outcome-productive. With these ideas, he has certainly triggered a fresh debate on the discourse on 'civilisational interactions'. It is imperative to note that in the beginning itself, the author clarifies that the work is meant to address the subject matter as a political scientist rather than as a historian. He states, 'As a political scientist interested in the spread and impact of ideas, my interest is in historiography, rather than history per se (p. 3)'. Naturally, therefore, as he states, his intended audience 'is the members of the political science community who have neglected the role of historiography, thereby missing an important opportunity to broaden and enrich their tool-kit for explaining continuity and change in world politics' (pp. 3-4).

Acharya mentions in detail the debate about the extent and scope of the Indian influence on Southeast Asia. He delves in greater details the works of O.W. Wolters, Osborne, Majumdar, Legge, Van Leur and Bentley among others, to set the wider canvass of Indian and other external influence on Southeast Asia in the classical era. Acharya seems to agree with Cady, who argues that the 'local genius' shaped the preferences for which foreign ideas would be congenial to the local matrix. To substantiate his point further, he cites the example of Eastern Java where Shiva is preferred over Vishnu, thus proving that the Southeast Asian practiced the 'pick and choose approach' in terms of borrowing of Indian ideas and practices that confirm to their own beliefs and demands. Furthermore, he points towards the evidence suggesting that in Southeast Asia, there indeed has been selective learning on the basis of 'local preference' and 'agency' (p. 23). In so far as localisation and adaptation of ideas in the local context is concerned, it is worth noting that varying degrees of localisation played a significant role in the adaptation and intermixing of Indian culture with the host culture of the Southeast Asian region.

Building up on Goldstein and Keohane's ideas, Acharya argues that the kind of ideas that found acceptance in Southeast Asia fall into what Goldstein and Keohane would call 'world views', especially since they were directly or indirectly rooted in Hindu and Buddhist religious philosophies and traditions. The book gets particularly interesting and appealing where Acharya compares and contrasts Hellenization

of the Mediterranean with the Indianization in Southeast Asia, and pithily concludes by saying, ‘The most important ideas influencing regional society and political matrixes were not those of materially hegemonic actors, namely, Rome and China, but those of countries which possessed superior ideational resources: India and Greece’ (p. 70).

The only shortcoming, if at all, of the book is that it is a short scholarly work. The author could have done more justice to the work had he elaborated upon a few more points for the benefit of the readers. Secondly, the work under review limits its scope by narrowing its target readership. For example, the book addressed the theme, which only fulfils the intellectual inquiries of an advanced reader. It does not cater to the requirements of the general readership as the reader is supposed to have already read several texts frequently cited in the book, and have made sense of the nuanced debates the author is addressing.

In the final analysis, one may say that the book is a value addition to the existing literature as it provides one with exhaustive details of theoretical underpinnings of spread of India’s soft power influence on the Southeast Asian region. Therefore, as India’s interest in the Southeast Asian region is rejuvenating, it is strongly recommended for those interested in the study of transformation of various aspects of power and spread of Indian culture and influence on Southeast Asia in particular.

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