Presidential tours are more ceremony than substance, yet Mr K.R. Narayanan would not have spent five days in Singapore if the island-state were not the key to a Southeast Asia that, as Amitav Acharya says, has "become the symbol of a dynamic, prosperous and peaceful region."

Indians know far too little about this suvarnabhumi of ancient lore. Until Mr P.V. Narasimha Rao's "Look East" revolution, we saw it as an American invention, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as an extension of the old Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation that had struck it rich.

Acharya reveals a more complex interplay of national, regional and international forces in which Cold War power politics may have provided the foil for local urges but was certainly not ASEAN's "onlie begetter". Supported by meticulously annotated evidence, he shows how in imagining itself (a la Benedict Anderson) to be a region when dealing with the great powers, Southeast Asia developed its own sense of cohesion. Regionalism became the instrument of survival for regimes that were threatened by superpower rivalry and domestic insurgency.

Perhaps the book pays insufficient attention to benevolent (if unwittingly so!) colonialism. Europeans did not shape the region but they created the entities - Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and even, to some extent, the Indochina states - that give it body. They also bequeathed the ideas.

As Max Weber wrote, capitalist institutions are not indigenous to Asia. Like the rule of law, scientific rationalism, fundamental rights, and, nearer home, the 19th century Bengal Renaissance, they are the product of dynamic contact with the West. The concepts of equality, libertarian politics and human rights took less firm root, recalling Hegel's notorious view that "the Orientals knew only that one (the ruler) was free". No wonder ASEAN nations were alarmed by Western attempts to spread democracy, and defied the European Union over Myanmar. Authoritarianism probably helped regionalism.

An exploration of the obstacle to unity from the ethnic and cultural diversity that is revealed in one of several useful tables lies outside Acharya's remit. That also means that the supposedly unifying force of "Asian values" is dismissed with passing mention, though he does take "the ASEAN way" of "quiet and consensual diplomacy" more
seriously. As befits a professor of international relations at Canada's York university, seconded to the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies in Singapore when he wrote this book, Acharya concentrates mainly on political developments.

Since regionalism leads to internationalism, supra-regional organisations like ASEAN's extensions and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum may be steps on the road to a one-world future. Which warns that the globalisation that some Southeast Asian leaders welcome might undermine ramparts already weakened by the economic crisis of 1997.

ASEAN's importance for India lies not as a model for the stagnant South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, but as a stepping stone to the Pacific destiny of which Jawaharlal Nehru dreamt in Ahmadnagar Fort prison.

All the more reason, therefore, why Acharya's incisive and exhaustive treatise should be read in this country. In spite of a somewhat dry style, Quest for Identity admirably explains the dynamics of a part of the world whose past was profoundly influenced by India but whose present could play a part in determining India's own future.