

BOOK REVIEW

Rajiv Bhatia, *India-Myanmar Relations: Changing Contours*, (New Delhi: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), Pages: 257, Price: Rs. 895.00

Burma was forcibly retired behind a bamboo curtain by Ne Win and the army when it lost democracy in 1962. Restricted elections five years ago allowed the country to open up, albeit under de facto military control. Elections in 2014 gave Aung San Su Kyi's NLD another landslide victory. The future of the nascent democracy is somewhat uncertain as the military establishment retains considerable power under the present constitution, which also prevents Su Kyi from becoming president of the country. However, the clock cannot be turned back beyond a point. The opening up will continue. A growing and possibly key role for India presents opportunities and challenges

Rajiv Bhatia's book *India-Myanmar Relations: Changing Contours* with its masterly overall view of the country including its history, politics, economy, external relations, etc. is most timely. He situates Myanmar in its regional and geopolitical frame between the two major neighbours India and China, and the growing relationship within ASEAN. He suggests future directions, which could be pursued to mutual advantage by India and Myanmar.

A shadow has hung over Indo-Myanmar relations since the army crackdown after the 1988 elections. At that time the Indian government supported Aung San Su Kyi and the democracy movement unequivocally. Later when the Burmese authorities began retaliating by helping militant activities in the Northeast, a more pragmatic policy of dialogue at the highest military level, as well as normalisation of government to government relations while maintaining as close contact as possible with Su Kyi, was reinstated. Su Kyi has not forgotten this. However, the future will most probably depend more on what India has to offer rather than on the past. She has warmly recalled the warm relations of her father with Jawaharlal Nehru. When Ne Win ousted the civilian government in 1962, Nehru speedily accepted the Embassy's recommendation to recognise the new government although recalling with great regret his close collaboration with U Nu. India was the first country to recognise Ne Win's government. (I was the DCM at that time.) National interest will always trump morality, and identifying the latter is never precise. The so-called international community, which was once as vociferous in support of the Dalai Lama as it was in condemning Myanmar, now gives him the cold shoulder and has warmed up to Naypyidaw!

In his last two chapters Bhatia discusses the India-China-Myanmar triangle and Future Directions for Bilateral Relations, and makes recommendations for future action. Both are commended strongly to our policy makers. In recent interactions with Myanmar officials and non-officials, most were positive about enhancing relations across a wide spectrum. There is some residual justifiable suspicion that both its big neighbours have to be watched as their traders and business men have a continuing record of wheeling dealing, and evading laws and regulations. This will be put to test as the economic relations develop in the future. For the present, the Indian public and private sectors must step up efforts to take advantage of a growing economy with considerable disposable aid income and a generous quantum of natural resources. In the interaction between the Chambers of Commerce in the region, it is clear that most Indian companies are reluctant to venture into most of Southeast Asia and even more so into Myanmar. In bilateral and multilateral meetings there are eloquent declarations, but little concrete action. Energy and infrastructure are probably the easy entry points, although agriculture and industry appear promising. Fast tracking connectivity is essential for Myanmar's development and in growing bilateral relations between the two countries. The social and communications sectors are seeking collaboration and development, and obtaining skills and training is required by the entire economy. Militancy generated by Northeastern groups requires cross border cooperation. Bhatia's book provides the necessary facts and makes detailed recommendations.

The role of government as a guide and a facilitator is crucial. Some reorientation of the Government of India's approach towards neighbours and even to other countries is called for. Leaving everything to the Ministries of External Affairs and Commerce appear to be the norm. Other Ministries and their public sector units are generally unwilling become part of an Indian team overseas. Domestic constituencies are their main and often only priority. Bilateral summits will only yield results if they are supported by periodic reviews at ministerial and official level to review the past and future agendas and record incremental progress. The individual country agendas would have to be fitted into any regional or broader agenda, but it should be the basic unit for operations. Our Embassy and the MEA Desk Officer should act as the record keeper. The Chinese, Japanese, Koreans and Europeans seem to have put in place far more effective systems than ours. We should draw on their expertise and not reinvent what already exists elsewhere. There is talk of releasing "animal spirits" to boost the Indian economy. An instance is the easing of regulations for the "Start-up India" campaign. Similar measures to generate enthusiasm in the external sector are essential. Ensuring a policy of providing excellence in production and a willingness to take reasonable risks will also enable India to gain the status abroad commensurate to its size and capacity. The inherent promise of the Act East policy requires that it be given

primacy in allocating resources and ensuring attention of government and business managers. The development of our North East as a major takeoff point for this policy with provision of adequate human, economic, infrastructural and technical resources and close collaboration by local communities and governments is an essential precondition.

India was born into a difficult neighbourhood and most of her energy has been directed at making it more stable and congenial. This has put China and Pakistan at the top of our priorities and this will remain. However, it might be time for a more nuanced policy to be considered. Inevitably, Bhatia draws attention to the India-China-Myanmar triangle. The author and the experts he quotes, consider that there will be an unequal competition with India inevitably coming second to China. Having spent ten years along with others from that region nursing the BCIM Forum, I would opine that in the emerging global multi-polar world cooperation can and should coexist with competition. As we develop connectivity and regional cooperation there is reason to accept that interdependence will grow. As we try to manage, with finite resources, combining to use those available, is certain to make good sense and efficiency. The European Union is built on those premises and even its present difficulties only underline the basic soundness of its design except that it failed to put in place a supranational political system to manage a supranational currency. Asia can and should find durable answers to make the nation state coexist with its neighbours in most dimensions. Cannot the successors to Chanakya and Confucius join together to find a way to do this and undo the ineffectiveness of the existing UN and Bretton Woods Systems? Then Myanmar and the other nations of Asia might find that they do not have to look over their shoulders so hard at their giant neighbours. Indeed, Myanmar is already more wary of Chinese intentions than some of her other neighbours due to past experience. She has found considerable comfort in the embrace of ASEAN. Singapore has long been a favoured adviser, market, and role model. Japan has also been a major source of development aid, technology, etc. apart from its historical role in Burma's independence. ASEAN has not been able to establish a constructive dialogue with China over territorial claims in the South China. However, with its vaunted capacity to find answers to problems such as confrontation between Malaysia and Indonesia and the great power divide over Indo-China, maybe it can someday address this problem too.

As Burma withdrew from the world, books, literature on it almost disappeared. Recently, there has been some revival especially in SE Asia and India. This needs to increase especially from Myanmar itself. During his last visit this writer noticed a welcome cultural revival including foreign presentations in Myanmar.

The book under review with its meticulous research and presentations could well become a text book on Myanmar for many. It will surely be required reading for those in the Indian establishment dealing with that country and also for those interested in India's extended neighbourhood. It is also evident that the Indian Foreign Service can produce scholars who can effectively project a deep understanding of the country of their accreditation. Rajiv Bhatia's book will hopefully encourage more members of the Foreign Service to join the small group that seeks to bring to India and the world the fascinating realities of the countries in which they served.

Eric Gonsalves
Former Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs
Former Ambassador of India to Japan, Belgium,
the EEC and Luxembourg
