

# BOOK REVIEW

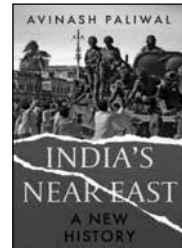
## **India's Near East: A New History**

Avinash Paliwal

Published by: Penguin Random House India

ISBN: 9780143467700

2024, 480 pp.



## **BANTIRANI PATRO**

*India's Near East: A New History*, authored by Avinash Paliwal, was released at a moment of intense geopolitical churn in India's eastern flank. Published in 2024, the book arrived right before Bangladesh's former Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, was ousted from power following the student-led July revolution. Its timing is consequential for two more reasons: Manipur, a state in India's northeast, was reeling under ethnic violence between the Kuki and Meitei communities, which first broke out in 2023; and Myanmar's military junta, which captured power through a coup in 2021, was at loggerheads with multiple ethnic armed groups. Bearing these developments in mind, this book emerges as a crucial and timely contribution to understanding the region.

---

Ms **Bantirani Patro** is a Research Associate at the Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies, New Delhi.

Paliwal employs the term 'Near East' to collectively describe Bangladesh, Myanmar and India's northeastern states, imparting analytical coherence to a geography that was once administratively united under colonialism. At the same time, the author adds a caveat in using the term 'Near East', and renounces the colonial and racial connotations that have long accompanied it, as well as similar terms like the 'Middle East' and 'Far East'. Paliwal uses two lenses, *outside in* and *inside out*, to posit a key argument, that India's domestic state-building is inextricably linked to its foreign policy towards its eastern neighbours, and vice-versa. The book revolves around the central question of why India's Near East is less connected in 2024 than it was in 1947. To unpack this, the author determines four broad yet interconnected themes—identity politics, cross-border migration, political economies, and official antinomies—that have shaped the region.

The book is structured into three parts and ten chapters, tracing developments from 1947 to 2024 while also offering brief historical insights into earlier watershed events, such as the 1937 partition of Burma from colonial India, that evince how certain extant problems have colonial antecedents. Among these, the Rohingya refugee crisis stands out, which the author traces back to 1942, when Britain created the 'Volunteer Force' (V-Force) by recruiting from Muslim communities in Arakan to harass the Japanese troops. The V-Force's failure in doing so, along with its destruction of Buddhist emblems in the process, rendered its members, whose successors now constitute the Rohingyas, victims of state-sponsored discrimination and subjects of administrative apathy in Yangon.

The book's first section titled 'Solidarity' covers temporal events from 1947 to 1970. It narrates how India prioritised constitutional survival in the face of mass migration from then-East Pakistan and Burma into India, and the concomitant ethnic, communal and communist anxieties that threatened India's post colonial state-building. This phase of constitutional survivalism, the author argues, steadily gave way to militarism and constitutional collapse in India's near east. This shift is best illustrated by the military takeovers in both Pakistan and Burma, and by India's enactment of the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers (Assam and Manipur) Act (AFSPA).

Although Jawaharlal Nehru, India's prime minister from 1947 to 1964, once remarked that the "contagion of democracy from India would spread to these countries instead of the other way around" when questioned about the "contagion of military coups" spreading to India (p. 73), in practice, he prioritised national security over civil liberties. Here, Paliwal's *outside in* lens is manifest. Pakistan's sponsorship of the northeast rebels, from Naga to Mizo insurgents, followed by joint Chinese and Pakistani backing after the 1962 and 1965 Wars respectively, had strengthened India's resolve to legitimise the use of force domestically to preserve territorial integrity.

This also gave rise to what Indian policy-makers assessed as a 'two-and-a-half-front' security situation. To resolve this dilemma, India began to seriously contemplate comprehensive intervention to liberate East Pakistan from the clutches of its western counterpart. This phase is examined in the book's second and largest section, titled 'Security', which covers the years from 1971 to 1990 across five chapters. Although India succeeded in dismembering Pakistan and won the war, it lost the peace. Despite the signing of peace accords, secessionist tendencies in India's northeast continued to fester, more so after 1971, turning the military triumph into a pyrrhic victory. Paliwal contends that India became a victim of its success: Bangladesh's liberation led it to espouse a security-centric policy that favoured a single party and individual over democratic institution-building in Bangladesh. This was reflective of the theme of official antinomies. India justified 1971 on the premise that Pakistan was subverting Mujib's democratic mandate, yet it subsequently went on to back Mujib's undemocratic turn. The limits of this approach were laid bare after Mujib's assassination, when successive governments routinely resorted to anti-India rhetoric. However, as history would go on to show, India did not absorb the lesson of not putting all its eggs in one basket, given its support to Hasina and, by extension, her authoritarian tendencies. The author, thus, acutely observes that the constant churn in India's Near East gave birth to a consensus in New Delhi that friendly regional authoritarians are preferable to adversarial populists.

The final section, titled 'Connectivity', spans developments from 1991 to 2024, making it not only the most contemporary

part of this book, but also among the few scholarly works to offer a granular contextualisation on the aspects that have moulded the region in recent decades. It is also in this part where the four thematic strands outlined above are most explicitly articulated and closely linked. For instance, the intersection between cross-border migration and identity politics is perceptible in the politicisation and communalisation of illegal migration from Bangladesh into India. Having become an electorally salient issue for the ruling right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), especially in Assam, Bangladeshi Muslims are typically cast as 'infiltrators' while non-Muslims are categorised as 'refugees'. In this context, Paliwal identifies an official antinomy in India's approach to its Near East, which is that, while New Delhi seeks regional integration through the likes of the Look East and Act East policies, it fosters divisions in the same region for vote-bank politics. This is where India's domestic outlook appears to be at odds with its international diplomacy. In certain cases, however, the two seem to have convergences. The author shows this by arguing that politics in India and Myanmar sing the same tune of exclusionary religious nationalism—Hindu nationalism in the former and Buddhist nationalism in the latter—which, in the absence of robust connectivity, acts as a glue between the two.

Another comparatively underexplored theme in both public discourse and literature is political economies, on which Paliwal notes that India's near east is better connected by the illicit drug trade, to which state actors wittingly turn a blind eye, since the profits benefit them as well. Ethnic insurgents in India's northeast, who are at the centre of this informal economy, are tacitly expected to reduce violence in return for operating drug cartels, thereby contributing to the emergence of a 'crime-politics-bureaucracy' nexus. An equally striking observation the book makes is that the India-based Adani Group, known for its proximity to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has become the key arbiter of India's Act East policy by securing contracts in both Bangladesh and Myanmar. The author, then, arrives at a rather sobering conclusion. Despite Modi rebranding 'Look East' as 'Act East' to telegraph greater proactivity in the region, India's success has remained suboptimal, with Beijing outcompeting New Delhi.

Taken together, these sections reveal the author's painstaking effort to lend focus to a region that has been foundational to the making of modern India. While popular imagination continues to fixate disproportionately on Kashmir, India's Near East has arguably witnessed far more conflicts, and, in that sense, has a richer history than its western flank in guiding India's domestic and international policies.

Like any piece of work, this book is not without its shortcomings. While Paliwal incisively demonstrates India's limited success in its near east, he attributes the region's connectivity failures primarily to communal politics and the rise of Hindutva in India, which some readers may interpret as being indicative of a particular ideological orientation. In the epilogue, Paliwal writes that the central lesson to be learnt from the geopolitics of India's Near East, is that "communal passions are easy to spark and difficult to contain". Notwithstanding the validity of this judgement, a region riven by multiple, layered complexities offers lessons extending beyond a singular aspect, and, in that vein, warranted further exploration. This nonetheless does little to diminish the rigour or contemporary relevance of the analyses brought forward. For scholars and practitioners alike, this book would remain an indispensable and pertinent read, likely to become a cornerstone for understanding India's eastern frontier.