BOOK REVIEW-I


Japan-India relations have always been a topic close to a number of academicians for a number of reasons. However, comprehensive literature on the bilateral relations remains scattered in book chapters and international journals. A comprehensive study encompassing all the aspects of India-Japan relations was needed at one place in the form of a book to give a clear picture about the multi-faceted aspects of the much talked about bilateral relations to readers. The book authored by Shamshad Khan has attempted to give a holistic view of these bilateral relations. The title of the book itself is explanatory and one can have a basic knowledge of everything starting from religion to more contemporary foreign policy and strategic issues. The book is divided into eight chapters, starting from chapter on Buddhism to the last concluding chapter which does provide some policy suggestions.

The author tracing the roots of the bilateral ties points out that ever since the introduction of Buddhism in Japan, the religious and cultural connects have bound the two Asian nations together. Even though, political and economic relationship between them drifted from the path because of various external factors, during the Cold War period and thereafter in 1998 Pokharan test, and the bilateral relations between the two nations remained below par but the cultural and religious ties were never disrupted (p.7). It is interesting to note that when Japan reopened itself following Meiji Restoration in 1868, Tokyo was looking forward to join the big league and India was not on their foreign policy priorities. Nevertheless, a section of people talked about Pan-Asian identity, and thus aiming to unite people on the basis of commonalities which they possess because of the geographical vicinity (p.10). There were a few renowned scholars from both the nations who visited each other’s country so as to find even more similarities and talked about how the two nations should learn from their achievements and mistakes. A dialogue among the intellectual dialogue among the thinkers of the two countries began thereafter. Visits of Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore to Japan and Okakura Tenshin’s visit to India and the dialogue these intellectuals were held. These remain an important source of information which the author has harnessed to the maximum amount possible. Not many scholars have talked about Tagore’s visits to Japan and the dialogue he initiated with the Japanese people in the context of India-Japan relations. Friendly ties between Okakura Tenshin and Tagore are an important landmark in the history of bilateral ties of
India and Japan, asserts the author. Khan also examines the role of Indian revolutionaries, who fascinated by Japanese slogan of Pan-Asianism shifted their base to Tokyo, and helped in further cementing India-Japan relations. It is well known fact that Indian revolutionaries like Rash Bihari Bose, Subhash Chandra Bose and others took Japan’s help in their endeavour to liberate India. The author, however, analysing key documents asserts that Japan’s support to Indian revolutionaries were motivated by Tokyo’s political agenda which was to create a Japanese led order in Asia by driving the British out of the region including India. The objective could not be achieved because of Japan’s defeat in the World War II. The author has examined various agreements signed between Indian Independence League and Japanese agencies to understand the purpose behind Japan’s cooperation with the Indian revolutionaries.

After tracing the origin and evolution of India-Japan cultural and historical relationship in first few chapters chronologically, the author turns his attention towards more recent developments in their bilateral relations thematically from chapter three onwards. He talks about the developments in the bilateral relations during the Cold War period, how Japan thought that India was silently supporting USSR under the façade of NAM (Non-Alignment Movement) and India on the other hand considered Japan a lackey of the US. Because of these apprehensions that they had about each others, the relationship could not be deepened, though occasional political level talks did take place. However, to believe that bilateral relations remained completely frozen during the Cold War would lead to wrong assumption, asserts the author. He points out that Foreign Ministerial level dialogues were institutionalized during the Cold-War period, paving way for a number of Memorandum of Understanding between the two nations over trade and commerce (p.55) and without these mechanisms the bilateral relations could not have blossomed and reached to this stage in the post Cold War era.

The author has devoted an entire chapter examining the impact of India-Japan Strategic Partnership highlighting key developments and the commitments to deepen the relationship made during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s period and elevation of the partnership into a special strategic partnership during Narendra Modi’s era. Apart from examining the statements issued after the summit level dialogue starting from 2006, the author examines how the strategic partnership has helped augment bilateral defense cooperation including in the maritime security which was almost missing before the beginning of strategic partnership between the two Asian democracies.

Deepening the economic engagement is one of the key agenda of the bilateral strategic partnership. The author has dedicated one chapter on
India-Japan economic cooperation to make the readers understand more clearly the developments in economic ties after 1950s. With the signing of Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2011, both the nations have gained and their bilateral trade has increased phenomenally. India has also helped Japan diversify the need of its rare earth elements (p.125). But, the infrastructural bottlenecks are restricting Japan to invest more in India as statistics suggest that as of March 2016, somewhere around 1200 companies have set up their bases in India while there are more than 8000 companies which have set up bases in China. This suggests that India would have to consistently engage Japan to attract their investors and provide the kind of infrastructure they expect.

While the two key priority areas of the strategic partnership is to deepen security and economic relations, the third but equally important priority area of this partnership is to forge a rule based order in the Asia-Pacific region. The author has beautifully captured the nuanced approach taken by India and Japan to create a rule based order to secure global commons including Sea Lanes of Communications free from hindrance from an expansionist power. The political leaders do talk about an ideal, value based order but in practical, it was more than difficult to have an order like that. Japan removing sanctions from North Korea (in 2014) even after knowing the stances of the USA and South Korea, and India going ahead with China in setting up of AIIB prove that when it comes to taking advantages of any situation, no one is willing to stand behind. The author has also mentioned that India and China’s mutual hatred towards the functioning of the two Bretton Woods institutions namely, IMF and World Bank paved a way for better ties between China and India on seeking an alternative financial order.

India-Japan nuclear cooperation is one of the most talked issue in the bilateral relationship. In chapter seven, the author has tried to put forward the stances of both the countries on the nuclear cooperation and the nuclear order on which the two have yet to resolve their differences. When it comes to nuclear related issues, India wants a complete abolition of the nuclear weapon and therefore has not signed the NPT (Non-proliferation Treaty), while Japan accepting the legitimacy of the possession of nuclear weapons by P-5 nations completely differs with India (p.155). Despite Japan’s apprehension about India’s nuclear programme and its stand taken regarding the nuclear order, Tokyo has finalised the deal with India considering the huge financial benefits its nuclear market offers to Japan. The author has analysed the stand taken by various groups supporting and opposing the deal as well as the text of the deal which the readers will surely find interesting and informative. The
subsequent chapter concludes the book with some policy suggestions made by the author himself. He has suggested that India and Japan though started their relationships strictly with the cultural ties, it has grown today into a ‘special strategic and global partnership’ (p.188). Both the nations should thrive to become closely tied with the help of three factors, namely, cultural-religious, political and economic.

Khan has put forward, one of a kind book when it comes to the time period of the ties between India and Japan. Not many scholars look into the historical ties of any two countries while discussing their bilateral ties. Also, the amount of research author has put into finding and quoting texts when it comes to the travelogue of Rabindranath Tagore is unexceptional. There were some suggestions by the author which seemed to be too good to be true such as when it comes to infrastructural facilities provided by the Indian government for Japanese companies, the author has mentioned that Japanese companies should not wait for the betterment of these infrastructural facilities to improve and should right away start investing. One should understand that Japan is not China or any other country when it comes to business; there are some international standards which need to be met before investing in any country and Japan makes sure that those standards are being appreciated and provisions for the same should be facilitated by the host countries. Also, when it comes to 2+2 dialogues, the author has said that both the countries should upgrade their strategic dialogues, but again one must not forget that China’s position in Asia and in the world currently is such that no one can upset her in any manner possible. Overall, the book is a must read for not only those who take keen interests in India-Japan relations but also for those who follow International Relations.

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