BOOK REVIEW

Roots of local Indian businesses

Beyond the Myth: Indian Business Communities in Singapore
Jayati Bhattacharya
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore
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By AMITENDU PALIT

COSMOPOLITANISM is an inescapable feature of Singapore. States and cities with geographical characteristics similar to Singapore’s, particularly proximity to the coast and the sea, have traditionally been “melting pot” societies. Singapore is no exception. Over the years, it has drawn a diverse variety of ethnicities into its mainstream.

People, originally traceable to the Indian subcontinent or South Asia, are an important constituent of the core population here.

This Indian diaspora was mainly driven by commercial and business impulses to locate in Singapore. Indeed, ethnic Indian businesses continue to thrive and prosper in the city-state. In Beyond the Myth: Indian Business Communities in Singapore, Jayati Bhattacharya examines and discovers how Indian business communities here have shown remarkable ability to adapt to local business dynamics, and expected to continue doing so.

The book is structured in two parts. The first is a historical narrative of the migratory flow of Indians to Singapore. It begins with the beginnings of Indians moving to what was then an outpost of the British empire. Indian migration to Singapore goes back to as early as 1819. The migrants during the colonial era were not only Tamil labourers for plantations, but also an English-speaking educated middle class in clerical and technical jobs.

The book goes on to examine at length the quality of migration after Singapore attained independence and provides interesting insights on how the business migrants renegotiated their spaces in changing political and economic circumstances. Part one ends with the narrative moving into the latest phase of migration in the post-Cold War era, which, among other things, has been characterised by the robust growth of bilateral strategic bonding between India and Singapore.

Part two of the book moves to a more micro-level examination of the story: it looks at the role that business associations have played, particularly historically active organisations like the Singapore Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. It also recounts three very different experiences of Indian entrepreneurship – those of the Kewalram Chanrai group, Mustafa and Chemwell.

From a contemporary perspective, objective research on the role of Indian business communities in South-east Asia and the greater Asia-Pacific is important given India’s increasing commercial integration with Asia and its growing strategic importance.

Documentation of the annals and accounts of Indian businesses in a country like Singapore underscores the fact that Indians aren’t new to the region, and neither is Indian entrepreneurship. On the contrary, the historical evidence reinforces arguments proposing modern India’s greater engagement with Southeast Asia.

As Professor Tan Tai Yong points out in his foreword to the volume, this is probably the first effort of its kind to focus exclusively on the local Indian business community and the roles played by Indian communities in its modern economic history. The book serves as a valuable addition to the still-small but growing body of literature on Indian business overseas.

Amitendu Palit is Head (Development and Programmes) and Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISEAS) in the National University of Singapore (NUS).