Singapore: a superb link to rest of Asia for South Asian diaspora

PM Lee highlights Republic’s location at crossroads of trade, talent, capital flows

By MALMINDERJIT SINGH
[SINGAPORE] For the South Asian diaspora, the road to the rest of Asia and the world may run through Singapore.

No wonder then when 700 delegates with roots in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and other South Asian countries prepared to meet, they did so this week in Singapore.

“Singapore is located at the crossroads of trade, talent and capital flows,” Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said yesterday. It is business-friendly and family-friendly and “a natural hub for companies and talent to connect with another”.

Delivering the opening address at the inaugural South Asian Diaspora Convention, Mr Lee also pointed out that another feature of Singapore – which makes it an excellent base for the South Asian diaspora to branch out from – is its familiarity with Northeast Asia.

“We have a majority population of Chinese origin, and our cultural affinity and common language give us a deeper understanding and better access to the Chinese market.”

Moreover, Mr Lee added, Singapore also enjoys good connections with South Asia. “We are geographically close by and many Singaporeans of South Asian origin maintain ties with their ancestral countries and can serve as facilitators in Singapore.

“Some Singaporean children regularly return to their ancestral homes to brush up on their native tongues... This helps the diaspora to retain ties through language, customs and practices.”

Mr Lee singled out ties with India to show how Singapore was getting closer to South Asia. “We signed a landmark Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) with India in 2005 and, since then, bilateral trade has boomed, exceeding $30 billion in 2010. Singapore has also become the second largest foreign investor in India, while Asean also has an FTA (free trade agreement) with India. Bilateral and regional trade will deepen as India prospers.”

As other South Asian countries “stabilise and grow, we can similarly develop and strengthen our economic ties”, Mr Lee said.

Tarun Das, former chief mentor to the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), said that education was one field where Singapore and India could soon be on the same page.

“Singapore is keen to have an Indian ITI (Indian Institute of Technology) here and Kapil Sibal (the Indian education minister) has given approval on this. The concept paper, prepared by the Indian Ministry of Education, has been sent to Singapore and is now being studied by the new Minister for Education, Heng Swee Keat.”

A Singaporean advantage: Mr Lee told delegates that Singapore’s familiarity with Northeast Asia makes the Republic an excellent base for the South Asian diaspora to branch out from.

India is also studying Singapore’s Institute of Technical Education (ITE) model and there are plans for the first ITE to be set up in India in collaboration with Singapore. “We (India-Singapore) are doing so many different things together but we have not even touched the tip of the iceberg for education yet,” Mr Das said.

At the conference organised by the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), Mr Lee said many from the 50-million-strong South Asian diaspora have done well in their adopted homes and on the international stage, and this “reflects the quality and talent within the diaspora”.

He pointed out that the diaspora all over the world maintain two important connections by building bridges, firstly, between their adopted homes and their homelands, and then, with the local communities in their adopted homes.

In building links with their homeland, Mr Lee explained that remittances play an important role and illustrated that the Indian diaspora remitted US$50 billion to India in 2010 while the Pakistani diaspora remitted US$5 billion to Pakistan annually – a “very substantial sum.”

Mr Lee said that the first wave of the South Asian diaspora in the 19th and early 20th centuries made significant contributions to Singapore. He was optimistic that in time the new wave of the South Asian diaspora, these past 10-15 years, will also integrate into Singapore society, both with the Singaporean Indians and other ethnic groups, and contribute much to Singapore.

“It is important to balance these connections because if the diaspora focuses only on its links with its homeland, it may not be welcomed by the local community and if the diaspora becomes too localised, then it risks losing touch with its original culture and heritage. Either will compromise the diaspora’s effectiveness as a link between original homelands and adopted homes,” he explained.

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