‘Singapore can’t punch above its own weight if it depends on local talent’

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SINGAPORE — Former Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew said yesterday Singapore would not be able to punch above its own weight if it were to depend on talent from its own population. He was speaking at a dialogue to wrap up the two-day South Asian Diaspora convention here.

DBS Bank CEO Piyush Gupta posed a question to Mr Lee, asking just how big the issue of attracting foreign talent in Singapore is, having noted that it was a hot topic during the recent General Election.

Mr Lee felt it was an issue among Singaporeans even before the election. He said: “For some time, the Singaporean has felt the competition from talented foreigners. But these are people who have come here to become our citizens and I am a firm believer that the more talent that you have in a society, the better the society will grow.

“If Singapore depends on the talent it can produce out of 3 million people, it’s not going to punch above its weight.

“It’s because we have been drawing talent from across the globe — South Asia, North-east Asia, China, India and beyond that — you have a vibrant economy which is way beyond what 3 million Singaporeans with the talent they can produce can do.

“So you’ve got to accept the discomfort which the local citizens feel, that they are competing unequally for jobs. (It) cannot be helped.

“But without them, the jobs will not be there to begin with. So welcome talent and we’ll continue to welcome talent.”

When asked how the political problem associated with the foreign talent issue could be managed, Mr Lee said: “You just have to assuage it.

“What is the choice — slow growth with no input of talent or faster growth with input of talent and the feeling that some of the top jobs are going to the foreigners? You may get no jobs at all if there were no growth.”

Several participants at the convention also took the opportunity to tap Mr Lee’s views on the importance of governance and meritocracy for the success of a country. One question raised during the dialogue was how Mr Lee would have governed India, if the country was handed to him.

Mr Lee replied: “First, what sort of Indian would I be? A northern Indian? A southern Indian? That identifies you with the interest of a particular group.

“Or a Bombay Indian, which is the most cosmopolitan of all. But it may well be that a Bombay Indian doesn’t represent Indians at all, so it’s a problem India has to face.

“It is important whoever leads India should find acceptance with the widest group of Indians possible. But I think it is very difficult for any Indian leader to find more than 40 per cent of Indians believing he represents them.”

Mr Lee also noted that Indians speak nearly 300 different languages but, in China, 90 per cent of the people speak the same language and that makes it a much easier country to lead than India.