

## ***India and Singapore: Fifty Years of Diplomatic Relations***

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*Without the contribution that we have had from India, her rich and enduring past, her sagacious and enterprising people, we would have been that much the poorer.*

Lee Kuan Yew, *Former Singapore Prime Minister*<sup>1</sup>

*Today, Singapore is one of our most important partners in the world. It is a relationship that is as strategic as it is wide-ranging.*

Narendra Modi, *Prime Minister of India*<sup>2</sup>

In ancient times, Singapore - earlier known as Tamaseek - was linked to the Greater India economy and culture through India's expanding maritime trade.<sup>3</sup> The modern-day relationship between India and Singapore can be traced to 1891 when Stamford Raffles convinced the East India Company administration to make the trading station of Singapore (en route to the Straits of Malacca) a British base between South and Southeast Asia.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Singapore became a crown colony, governed from Calcutta till 1867. Singapore's Foreign Minister, George Yeo, called modern Singapore the 'daughter of Kolkata'.<sup>5</sup> Later, this British strategic enclave became the base of Indian nationalists fighting British imperialism from abroad, with Subhas Chandra Bose setting up the Indian National Army in Singapore in July 1943. From 21 October 1943 onwards, the Provincial Government of Azad Hind functioned from Singapore till it was moved to Rangoon on 7 January 1944. Singapore became a part of Malaya in 1962, but broke away in 1965 as an independent republic. The relationship between India and Singapore survived the difficult terrain of the Cold War to become what Prime Minister Modi calls, the 'warmest and closest' relationship.<sup>6</sup>

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In analysing the evolution of this relationship, the seminal point raised by Theva Yogaanathan and Rahul Mukherjee is that Indo-Singapore bilateralism has been determined by the 'interconnectedness of security and commercial relations'.<sup>7</sup>

### **India and Singapore: The First Phase**

Mainstream Indian nationalist leaders keenly watched the developments in Malaya during the World War II. Despite great odds, Jawaharlal Nehru visited Singapore in 1946 to see the disbanded INA troops, who had surrendered to the British Military Administration of Malaya following the surrender of Japan. Nehru was cheered by INA soldiers in uniform with Indian flags as he drove along the streets of Singapore.<sup>8</sup> Three years after becoming Prime Minister, he re-visited Singapore, addressing a historic rally at the Jalan Besar stadium. Independent India demonstrated its solidarity with Singapore in the aftermath of British withdrawal by supporting its merger with the Malaysian Federation despite opposition from Indonesia, China, and the Philippines.<sup>9</sup> Nehru's untiring efforts convinced the Afro-Asian nations that the Singaporean leader, Lee Kuan Yew, was a neutralist - that is, neither a Chinese chauvinist nor a 'colonial stooge'.<sup>10</sup>

In 1965, when Singapore separated from the Malaysian Federation, New Delhi was one of the first to recognise the sovereign republic. But India failed to respond to Singapore's request for military cover to meet the security challenge from the Chinese-sponsored communist insurgencies in Malaysia and Indonesia,<sup>11</sup> and the intra-ethnic bitterness between Malays and the Chinese.<sup>12</sup> The Singapore Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, wrote to his counterpart, Lal Bahadur Shastri, on 9 August 1965:

We ourselves cannot afford to build up forces sufficient to protect ourselves from aggression by our neighbours ... For my government to use British officers to help in this may be said to be tainted with neo-colonialism. I therefore seek your government's assistance to send a team as soon as convenient to advise us in this.<sup>13</sup>

Israel offered to train Singapore's army, but Lee preferred to wait for India's response.<sup>14</sup> However, the Indian government did not respond to Singapore's request for military assistance<sup>15</sup> - perhaps due to its commitment to Non-alignment and its closeness to the Soviet Union at a time when the new-born Singapore was set to play the US geo-political role. Nevertheless, India extended diplomatic help for Singapore's integration into the world community by supporting its admission to the Commonwealth, the United Nations, and the Afro-Asian Conference.<sup>16</sup>

Differences on strategic thinking between the two states grew during the tenure of Indira Gandhi, whom Lee Kuan Yew considered 'the toughest woman prime minister.'<sup>17</sup> Lee's plea for India to be a stabilising factor in Southeast Asia during his 1966 Delhi visit went unreciprocated, partly because of the pressure of the pro-Soviet group within the Indian bureaucracy, dubbed by an analyst as the 'Moscow Mafia', who considered South-East Asian regimes as American or Japanese puppets,<sup>18</sup> and partly due to the domestic economic crisis that prevented Delhi from taking on any new external commitments. However, Prime Minister Gandhi chose to provide an ideological justification to support the Indian stand when, during her trip to New Zealand in May 1968. She expressed India's objection to any move by an external power to fill any power vacuum in Southeast Asia.<sup>19</sup> Emboldened by the replacement in neighbouring Indonesia of the belligerent Sukarno regime by the pro-US Suharto one, the Singapore Prime Minister Lee now turned to the USA. This was the time when India was looking for Soviet support to counter the tacitly US-backed Sino-Pakistan front, and was defending its stand on the Kashmir issue at the United Nations Security Council. In this context, bitterness in the India-Singapore geo-strategic relationship was to be expected.

Yet, Singapore's first Ambassador to India, Maurice Banker, felt that in the absence of American presence India could contribute to containment of leftist politics of subversion in Southeast Asia if the USA was made to leave Vietnam.<sup>20</sup> When China undertook the nuclear tests in 1964, Lee even suggested that India should follow suit - 'at least for the sake of Southeast Asia, even if she wanted to throw it (the nuclear bomb) into the sea later.'<sup>21</sup>

The Kampuchean (Cambodian) crisis of the late 1970s further heightened the differential geo-political perceptions of India and Singapore. While India instantly recognised the replacement of the oppressive pro-Chinese Pol Pot regime by the Soviet-and Vietnam-backed Heng Samrin government, Singapore disapproved of the 'aggression and forcible installation of a puppet regime' in its neighbourhood.<sup>22</sup>

This period marked, as Kishore Mahbubani notes, the 'lowest point in bilateral relations',<sup>23</sup> and coincided with New Delhi's developmental strategy based on substituting import with industrialisation, impeding the country's integration with the world economy, thereby weakening Indo-Singapore economic relations.<sup>24</sup> But even then, Lee appreciated the Indian predicament, remarking: 'You (India) were caught up; these were obligations that you had to honour because of your close ties, military and economic, with the Soviet Union.'<sup>25</sup> Such underlying understanding contributed to the development of a productive Indo-Singapore bilateralism once the Cold War ended.

### **Developments in the Post-Cold War Period**

Prime Minister Narasimha Rao took the first effective step in making India a part of the evolving Asia-Pacific security framework when, with Singapore's support, it became a Dialogue Partner of the ASEAN in 1992, a full dialogue partner in December 1995, and a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996.<sup>26</sup> Rao's successor, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, also perceived Singapore as a potential 'geo-political ally' which could provide India a 'gateway into the rest of Southeast Asia'.<sup>27</sup> C. Raja Mohan has shown how the conspicuous absence of the security initiative in Indo-Singapore relations was redressed in 2003 through the Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) that 'launched vigorous security diplomacy in the region.'<sup>28</sup> It entailed cooperative intelligence gathering and a Defence Policy Dialogue; and expanded the zone of bilateral naval exercise SIMBEX (Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise) from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea. The 2005 Indo-Singapore Treaty on Mutual Legal Assistance addressed the issue of terror funding,<sup>29</sup> while 2007 onwards, India and Singapore were involved with joint military training exercises.<sup>30</sup> Singapore's deterrence capacity against Malaysia was improved by acquaintance with the equipment and tactics of Malaysian armed forces, since both India and Malaysia have traditionally been reliant on Soviet equipment.

This positivity in geo-strategic relations was contemporaneous with significant Indo-Singapore economic bilateralism. Already, in the initial phase of Rajiv Gandhi's premiership, this economic linkage was enhanced through trade fairs, engineering exhibitions, and talks on joint ventures in petrochemicals, fertilizers, diesel engines, engineering, and steel.<sup>31</sup> Realising the potential of increasing trade with the ASEAN, India established the India Investment Centre in Singapore in 1985, and later, the Singapore office of Export-Import Bank of India. Simultaneously, Singapore's Trade Development Board (TDB) sent eighteen missions to India, proposing investment opportunities in Singapore. It also set up its office in Bombay in 1986.<sup>32</sup> An exclusive Indian trade exhibition was held in Singapore in April 1987.

However, it was in the aftermath of the liberalisation of the Indian economy in the 1990s that New Delhi started looking East, along with its traditional Western partners, to attract foreign investment and explore external markets. In this context, Singapore, one of the strongest economies of Southeast Asia, inevitably attracted India. Significantly, this ideational change coincided with the Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's economic interest in India in his move to diversify Singapore's external investments and reduce engagement

with China. He thus initiated, in the 1990s, a 'mild India fever' in Singapore, encouraging his country's business houses to venture into India.<sup>33</sup>

### **India's Look East Policy**

The significance of Singapore in Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's Look East Policy was underlined by Finance Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, at a Singapore seminar concerning 'Investing in India: New Business Opportunities' on 18 October 1991: 'We in the Government of India thought, that if we have to market New India, we have to begin with Singapore.'<sup>34</sup>

Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister and Trade Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, visited India between 22 and 27 March 1992 to explore new bilateral trade and investment opportunities.<sup>35</sup> The total volume of these rose between the two countries from US \$1.08 billion in 1991-92 to US \$2.04 billion in 1996-97, registering an average rise of 13.7 percent in dollar terms.<sup>36</sup> On 8 September 1994, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao formally outlined India's Look East Policy in his lecture at Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.<sup>37</sup> He unveiled a vision of the Asia-Pacific region as 'our springboard to the global market-place' in which Singapore was rightly looked upon as 'a bridge to connect the rest of Asia with India.'<sup>38</sup> He viewed Singapore as India's 'gateway to the Pacific world.'<sup>39</sup> Singapore was also among the first in Southeast Asia to respond to the Look East Policy.

The potential of India's economic relationship with Singapore was aptly articulated by its next Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee when, in his 9 April 2002 Singapore Lecture he observed: 'Singapore has considerable strengths in the old economy and ambitions in the new economy. India has needs in the old economy and some competence in the new economy. In this lies a major confluence of our interests.'<sup>40</sup>

The bilateral economic connectivity further improved during the premiership of Manmohan Singh with the conclusion of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) on 29 June 2005. Singapore's first Free Trade Agreement with South Asia and India's first outside South Asia,<sup>41</sup> the CEPA, resulted in immediate tariff elimination on 506 items and proposed a phased tariff elimination on 4500 items by 2009. It also resulted in the avoidance of double taxation, property rights, and the quality recognition of goods and services. These contributed directly to the bilateral trade rising from US \$ 4.2 billion in 2003-2004 to US\$ 11.4 billion in 2006-2007.<sup>42</sup> By 2012 Singapore was India's 9<sup>th</sup> largest trading partner.<sup>43</sup> India's main exports to Singapore included petroleum products, both crude and refined; gems and

jewellery; electrical machinery and spare parts; and transport equipment and surgical instruments; its imports comprised electronic goods; organic chemicals; pharmaceuticals; transport equipment; printed books and other reading materials, and metal ores and scraps.<sup>44</sup> Significantly, a crucial part of this bilateral trade is re-export that takes place from Singapore to India.<sup>45</sup> The post-CECA years also saw the two countries collaborating to assist the CLMV countries.<sup>46</sup>

This surge in bilateral trade was contemporaneous with a rise in Indian investment in Singapore from US \$ 351 million in 2004–05 to US\$ 37.4 billion in April 2015.<sup>47</sup> By 2013, 6450 registered Indian companies - mostly trading and business consultancies - operated in Singapore, while India attracted Singapore's investment in ports, real estate, and construction.<sup>48</sup> Between April 2005 and January 2006 alone, Singapore's FDI in India registered a 300 percent growth, reaching a cumulative figure of US\$ 3 billion.<sup>49</sup> Stressing the significance of this new-found bilateralism, Goh Chok Tong, Singapore's former Prime Minister and then a Senior Minister, reminded his Asia Society audience in 2005: 'With India's rise it will be increasingly less tenable to regard South Asia and East Asia as distinct strategic theatres interacting only at the margins.'<sup>50</sup>

Thus, scholars like S.D. Muni contend that the Look East Policy has both reinforced India's cultural and economic links with the ASEAN and East Asia, and 'firmed up strategic relations with them.'<sup>51</sup> India-Singapore relations lie within this matrix.

### **New Era in India-Singapore Bilateralism**

India's connections with South East Asia deepened when, in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi transformed the Look East into Act East Policy. If the Look East Policy was about increasing economic integration with South East Asia, the Act East Policy aims at both economic and security linkages not only with South East but also East Asia. The Act East strategy also considers Singapore a crucial economic and geo-strategic point for India. Singapore's President Tony Tan Keng Yam's visit to Delhi (8 to 11 February 2015) occasioned explorations for new bilateral initiatives on smart cities, skill development, coastal and port development, and the strengthening of linkages with the North East of India. Singapore companies became involved with the construction of a new capital city for Andhra Pradesh.<sup>52</sup> Singapore industrial houses - like Gateway Distriparks, Snowman Logistics, Airtel, Temasek, and Government of Singapore Investment Corporation - considerably benefitted

from India's 'corporate sector friendliness'<sup>53</sup> But it was Prime Minister Narendra Modi's trip (23 and 24 November 2015) that took the relationship between the two countries to new heights. Delivering the 37th Singapore Lecture on 'India's Singapore Story' (23 November 2015) the Prime Minister remarked:

Our relationship is written in the pages of history, the footprints of culture, the ties of kinship and the old connection of commerce. We stood together in friendship at the dawn of freedom; and, we reached out to each other in a partnership of shared hopes. Singapore's success became an aspiration of Indians. And, in turn, India became the hope for a more peaceful, balanced and stable world.<sup>54</sup>

Prime Minister Modi's visit resulted in upgrading India-Singapore bilateral relations into a strategic partnership based on political exchanges; defence cooperation; trade and investment; air transport and maritime cooperation; smart city development; skill development; people-to-people exchanges; science, technology and research innovation; legal, judicial, financial and parliamentary cooperation; and collaboration in multilateral and regional fora.<sup>55</sup> Already the Indian Space Research Organisation had launched Singapore's first indigenously built micro-satellite in 2011. By 2015, the Maritime Security Strategy of India was stressing the security of the Indian Ocean 'choke' points, from the Cape of Good Hope to Malacca and Singapore Straits.<sup>56</sup> This period also witnessed the enhancement of civil aviation connectivity, with 464 weekly flights connecting 12 Indian cities from Singapore by May 2014.<sup>57</sup> Following the 2016 visit of Singapore Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, the two countries agreed to work for maritime security, freedom of navigation and flights, and unimpeded commerce in accordance with international law.<sup>58</sup> Indo-Singapore relations came to be hailed as a 'strategic partnership in the true sense'<sup>59</sup> In 2019, they conducted a joint naval exercise in the disputed South China Sea,<sup>60</sup> and a trilateral naval exercise by Singapore, India and Thailand (SITMEX).<sup>61</sup> The invitation to Singapore at the India-Africa Summit indicates the importance that Delhi attaches to their strategic relationship.<sup>62</sup>

On Indian Republic Day celebrations in 2018, Prime Minister Lee was the chief guest. In the same year, Prime Minister Modi visited Singapore twice: from 30 May to 02 June, and between 14 and 15 November. His May visit yielded 35 MOUs and new initiatives to address cyber security and terrorism issues.<sup>63</sup> On 1 June 2018, Prime Minister Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to deliver the Keynote Address at the annual Shangri La Dialogue, where he delineated India's vision of a peaceful and stable Indo-Pacific region.<sup>64</sup> During his November trip, he attended the East Asia Summit

and the 2nd Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Summit where he pitched for a comprehensive and balanced regional economic partnership. He also became the first head of government to address Singapore's Fintech Festival, where he assured the Fintech companies that 'India [wa]s [their] best destination.'<sup>65</sup> Moreover, he launched, with Deputy Prime Minister T Shanmugaratnam, the APIX (Application Programming Interface Exchange), a banking technology platform designed to reach nearly two billion people world-wide who were still without bank accounts.<sup>66</sup>

An inevitable upshot of this strategic relationship was a significant growth in economic bilateralism. In 2018, the two countries extended tariff concessions to another 30 items, resulting in bilateral trade reaching US \$16.3 billion in 2019-2020.<sup>67</sup> In 2014, India's External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj, specifically invited Singaporean investment for high-status projects like the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC), and the Chennai-Bangalore Industrial Corridor.<sup>68</sup> Singapore's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) rose from \$13.69 billion in 2015-16<sup>69</sup> to \$14.67 billion in 2019-20, representing 30 percent of the FDI in India.<sup>70</sup> If the cumulative FDI from Singapore into India from April 2000 to September 2019 was US\$ 91.02 billion, the outward Indian FDI to Singapore between January 2008 and December 2019 was US \$ 67.64 billion, making Singapore a top destination for Indian foreign investments.<sup>71</sup> More than 440 companies and two leading Singapore banks have their presence in India.<sup>72</sup> By 2018, Singapore-based investors had Assets Under Management of more than US\$ 100 billion in India.<sup>73</sup>

The two countries jointly developed the world-class Information Technology Park in Bengaluru; Singapore and Japan have collaborated to develop an integrated township within Chennai's IT and Industrial corridor; joint business ventures by Singapore Chambers of Commerce with their Indian counterparts are coming up in Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Karnataka.<sup>74</sup> Singapore's Sing Tel and India's Bharti Airtel are collaborating in telecommunication, and the Port of Singapore Authority has invested in container handling and terminal projects in Tuticorin, Chennai, Kolkata, and Mumbai.<sup>75</sup> Likewise, about 9,000 Indian firms are registered in Singapore; 6 public sector units and 9 leading banks (like the Indian Overseas Bank, the Indian Bank, the ICICI bank, the State Bank of India, the Bank of India, Axis Bank, and the UCO Bank) are operating in Singapore.<sup>76</sup> At least 80 percent of listed offshore bonds by Indian issuers are listed on the Singapore Stock Exchange.<sup>77</sup> Following Prime Minister Modi's 2018 visit to Singapore, the Temsak Holding, a Singapore Government Fund, contributed to the National Infrastructure Fund of India.<sup>78</sup> Singapore today is India's largest trade and



investment partner in the ASEAN, and the second largest foreign investor.<sup>79</sup> The period also saw the emergence of Vistara airlines in India, a joint venture of the Tata Group and Singapore Airlines.<sup>80</sup> Not unnaturally, India today occupies the third spot in Singapore's visitor arrivals, the number of Indian visitors rising from 778,303 in 2008 to 1.42 million in 2019.<sup>81</sup> Greater private sector engagement with a system of 'harmonised markets and trade links' can effectively carry forward this economic bond.<sup>82</sup>

The Act East period has experienced growth in India-Singapore connections in the areas of education and knowledge transfer.<sup>83</sup> India is set to benefit from the Singaporean experience with polytechnics and vocational training for implementing the Skill India, Make in India, Digital India, and Clean India projects. The two countries are developing a world class polytechnic facility in Delhi. Singapore's Institute of Technical Education and the Delhi Government's Training and Technical Education have collaborated to create a Skills Centre in Delhi; Singapore's Lee Kuan School of Public Policy offers training in Public Policy.<sup>84</sup> In 2004 the National University of Singapore set up a South Asian Institute to house Indian experts for promoting understanding between Asian states; in 2007 it became an enthusiastic partner in Indian President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam's plan to revive Nalanda University.

The number of Indian students going to Singapore is estimated to be rising by 20 percent each year.<sup>85</sup> During Prime Minister Modi's 2015 visit, an MOU was concluded between India's NITI Ayog and Singapore's Nanyang Technological University (NTU) for research partnership in artificial intelligence, machine learning, cognitive computing, big data analysis, smart energy systems, and e-governance.<sup>86</sup> The IITs, IISC (Bengaluru), and the Indian Institute of Space Science and Technology are being identified as India's nodal centres for scientific collaboration with Singapore. The participation of students from the Singapore Management University in the Infosys Instep Programme indicates that management education is another area for academic collaboration.<sup>87</sup> Also, the success of the Global Indian International School, the Delhi Public School, and the NPS International School shows further possibilities of the Indian private sector collaborating in Singapore's school education.

Among the Indian provinces, Maharashtra has attracted almost a third of this Singapore investment. West Bengal, too, has remained an enthusiastic participant in the enrichment of India's economic ties with Singapore. Between 2009-10 and 2012-13, the Falta Special Economic Zone's (SEZ) exports from

and imports to Singapore were respectively to the tune of US\$ 110.44 million and US\$ 115.52 million respectively, while total export trade through the Kolkata port to Singapore during that period was US\$ 1487.23 million. By 2012-13, Singapore was the second biggest export market from the Kolkata port after the USA, the major items being refined petroleum products. However, it is during the present Chief Ministership of Mamata Banerjee that West Bengal's economic link with Singapore has received a boost. Her visit to Singapore between 18 and 22 August 2014, termed as a 'turning point' for Bengal, resulted in the signing of 13 MOUs.<sup>88</sup> A business hub was proposed as a joint venture of the West Bengal and Singapore Governments.<sup>89</sup> A notable step in the direction of Singapore's investment in West Bengal was also taken. Already in 2009, Singapore's Changi Airports International Pte Ltd. (CAI) had decided to acquire 26 percent stake in Bengal Aerotropolis Projects Ltd. (BAPL) for developing a township centred around the upcoming Andal airport in the Bardhaman district.<sup>90</sup> Following the Chief Minister's visit, the Changi Airports International raised its stake in the project to 32.2 percent.<sup>91</sup> Today, Singapore is one of the top ten destinations of West Bengal's industrial products.<sup>92</sup>

### **The Diaspora Link**

Bilateral cultural connectivity has gone hand-in-hand with geo-strategic ties. Ethnic Indians constitute approximately 9.1 percent or 3.5 lakhs of Singapore's 3.9 million population, while about 3.5 lakh Indian expatriates holding Indian passports represent 21 percent of the 1.6 million foreigners in the city-state.<sup>93</sup> India is the second largest beneficiary of remittances from Singapore.<sup>94</sup> Singapore has recognised Tamil as one of the four official languages: Hindi, Gujarati, Urdu, Bengali and Punjabi are taught in the island's schools. Singapore's 'Little India', the initial settlement area for Indian migrants, remains a nodal trading point for India and Singapore. To preserve the cultural traits of Indian settlers and to acquaint the non-Indian Singaporeans with India's civilisational heritage, India and Singapore signed an MOU on 5 February 1993 to promote cooperation in arts, heritage, archives, and libraries.<sup>95</sup> Annual Indian festivals like Deepavali and Malay Hari Raya are observed. Vivekananda's historic speech at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1983, Gandhi's birthday, Hindi Divas, Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, and International Yoga Day are commemorated. The Singapore Indian Fine Arts, founded as early as 1949, and Nrityalaya and Kalamandir effectively promote Indian classical dance and music.<sup>96</sup> The Singapore Government has established the

Indian Heritage Centre, while Singapore's Museum of Asian Civilizations (ASC) recaptures the Indian legacy in the region.<sup>97</sup>

However, Singapore's ethnic Indian society is very heterogeneous: 64 percent are Tamils, 8 percent Malayalis, 7 percent Punjabis, 6 percent Sindhis and 2 percent Gujaratis; 6 percent are Hindus, 20 percent Muslims, 12 percent Christians, 7 percent Sikhs, and there are a small number Buddhists.<sup>98</sup> Economically, Singapore's Indians are divided too: a minority successful class in politics, business, and professions juxtaposed with a majority forming the society's 'underbelly'.<sup>99</sup> If India intends to use the Diaspora link to strengthen its connection with Singapore, this diversity must be recognised.<sup>100</sup>

The ethnic Indian connection has recently strengthened cooperation between the two countries in handling the COVID19 pandemic. When the pandemic struck Singapore, Indian migrant workers were among the worst-hit. By the end of March 2020, at least 4,800 Indians were infected by the virus.<sup>101</sup> Under the Vande Bharat Mission, the Indian High Commission repatriated 17,000 Indian nationals till September 2000 through 120 special flights.<sup>102</sup> Prime Ministers Modi and Lee Hsien Loon resolved to meet the Covid challenge by keeping supply chains intact and 'essential supplies flowing.'<sup>103</sup> Modi reiterated that the strategic India-Singapore partnership would work to bring stability and prosperity to the post-Covid world.<sup>104</sup> Meanwhile, Singapore's Confederation of Indian Industry and the India Business Forum raised 159,000 Singapore dollars (INR 86.60 lakh) to help the Indian migrant workers face the stress of the pandemic.<sup>105</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The India-Singapore relationship is today rooted in reciprocity, mutuality as well as economic, cultural and strategic links. The economic partnership is expanding from trading to investment; in geo-political terms, if India sees Singapore as its 'eastern anchor' of maritime security,<sup>106</sup> Singapore views India as a 'benign security partner' without any 'adverse historical baggage in the region'.<sup>107</sup> It remains keen to collaborate on regional stability by containing external interventions, especially from China. Neither would 'like to see the Asia Pacific dominated by any single power.'<sup>108</sup> The two states have also concurred at the East Asia Summit, the G-20, the Commonwealth of Nations, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association.

However, Singapore is yet to fully utilise investment potential in India, perhaps due to the lack of a 'Singapore lobby' in India.<sup>109</sup> Such developments as Pakistan's adoption of 'Vision East Asia' in 2005, Singapore's recent

promotion of economic ties in South Asia beyond India, including the Gulf,<sup>110</sup> and its support for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which would impose regulations for trade and investment which could be ‘non-tariff barriers’ for the entry of Indian goods in the region,<sup>111</sup> should alert Delhi to the need for reinforcing the relationship.

Neither country should insist on a ‘pseudo-exclusive relationship;’ they should strengthen their special ties while maintaining ‘well-balanced relations’ with all regional powers.<sup>112</sup> We shall wait to see how this connection flourishes, both in terms of regional or bilateral considerations as well as in the context of broader world politics, especially in the post-pandemic period. Summarising fifty years of Indo-Singapore diplomatic relations we agree that:

India-Singapore relations have laid a strong foundation of a cooperation framework covering a wide range of areas ... The challenge in the next 50 years would be to recognise these areas of strength, identify the areas of opportunities, and use that knowledge to take the relationship to the next level.<sup>113</sup>

#### **Notes :**

- <sup>1</sup> Foreign Affairs Record 1967, pp. 122-123.
- <sup>2</sup> The Strait Times, 23 November 2015.
- <sup>3</sup> [Shodhanga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/198806/7/chapter%204.pdf](http://Shodhanga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/198806/7/chapter%204.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> Raffles landed in Singapore with 120 Indian soldiers and servants who were primarily used to give the city a modern look. See, Shashi Tharoor, ‘Building The Future on the Strength of the Past’, in Tan Tai Yong & A.K. Bhattacharya (eds.), *Looking Ahead: India Singapore in the New Millennium: Celebrating 50 Years of Diplomatic Relations*, Singapore: AAC and ISAS, 2015, pp.171-172.
- <sup>5</sup> Foreword by Pranab Mukherjee to Sunanda K. Datta-Ray, *Looking East to Look West: Lee Kuan Yew’s Mission India*, Gurgaon: Penguin Books India 2009).
- <sup>6</sup> The Economic Times, 31 May 2018.
- <sup>7</sup> Yoganathan S/O Theva and Rahul Mukherjee, ‘India-Singapore Bilateral Relations 1965-2012: The Role of Geo-Politic. Ideas, Interests, and Political Will’, *India Review*, 14 4 2015, pp.419-439.
- <sup>8</sup> Datta-Ray, *Looking East to Look West*, p. 54.
- <sup>9</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story*, Singapore: Prentice Hall, 1998, p. 421.
- <sup>10</sup> Datta-Ray, *Looking East to Look West*, pp.80, 89-90.
- <sup>11</sup> Kripa Sridharan, *The ASEAN Region in India’s Foreign Policy*, Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1996, p. 41.

- <sup>12</sup> For details, see Lam Peng Er, 'Singapore's Security Outlook: The Immutability of History, Geography and Demography', National Institute of Defense Studies, Joint Research Series No. 5, [http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/eng/LEEsh/pubLEEcation/joint\\_research/series5/pdf/5-4.pdf](http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/eng/LEEsh/pubLEEcation/joint_research/series5/pdf/5-4.pdf).
- <sup>13</sup> Cited in Datta-Ray, *Looking East to Look West*, p. 104.
- <sup>14</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: Singapore and the Asian Economic Boom*, New York: Harper Business, 2011, p.15.
- <sup>15</sup> Annual Report, 1965-66, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India hereafter MEA, <https://meaLEEb.nic.in/?pdf2492?000>, p. 27.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> Cited in Datta-Ray, *Looking East to Look West*, p. 224.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 132-134. P. N. Hakser, an Indian diplomat, reportedly refused to consider Singapore as a country.
- <sup>19</sup> V. P. Dutt, *India's Foreign Policy*, Gaziabad: Vani Educational Books, 1984, p. 254.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.
- <sup>22</sup> *The Statesman*, 16 June 1980.
- <sup>23</sup> Cited in Dutt, *India's Foreign Policy*, p. 214.
- <sup>24</sup> Yogaananthan and Mukherjee, 'India-Singapore Bilateral Relations', p. 421.
- <sup>25</sup> Cited in Datta-Ray, *Looking East to Look West*, pp. 214-215.
- <sup>26</sup> In fact, as early as September 1992, Rao had discussed defence ties with his visiting counterpart, see S.D. Muni, 'India and Singapore: Bilateral Issues' in N. N. Vohra, (ed.) *Emerging Asia: Challenges for India and Singapore*, New Delhi: Manohar 2003, pp. 44.
- <sup>27</sup> Yogaananthan and Mukherjee, 'India-Singapore Bilateral Relations', p. 426.
- <sup>28</sup> C. Raja Mohan, 'An Uncertain Trumpet? India's Role in Southeast Asian Security', in Ajaya Kumar Das (ed.), *India-ASEAN Defence Relations*, RSIS Monograph No.28, Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, 2013, p. 28.
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