

Lee Kuan Yew
1923 - 2015



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WITH the demise of former Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, the key architect of Singapore's journey from the Third World to the First World, the world has lost one of the true great internationalists of the era. With an open mind that reached outwards, Mr Lee was able to connect himself and Singapore to the world that lay outside the limited geographical confines of the country. He became philosopher and friend to countless world leaders.

His imprint is seen clearly in the evolution of relations between Singapore and India.

As journalist-writer Sunanda K. Datta-Ray notes in his book, *Looking West To Look East*, Mr Lee had known every Indian prime minister since both countries became independent. This familiarity allowed him to nurture relations at both a personal and a bilateral level. In his many encounters with Indian leaders, Mr Lee took pains to emphasise that India must play a leading role in the global and regional arena. However, India was slow to do so because of its geostrategic compulsions.

That situation changed dramatically in the 1990s following the end of the Cold War. With the advent of Mr Narasimha Rao as prime minister and Dr Manmohan Singh as finance minister, the Indian government adopted its Look East policy. That strategic shift enabled India to reach out to its historical hinterland, *Suvarnabhumi*, or the Land of Gold.

Apart from encouraging India to re-visit the historical relationship, Mr Lee also urged it to strengthen its economic ties with Singapore. This emphasis resulted in the presence of 4,000 Indian companies in Singapore and a vibrant expatriate presence which has contributed to the vitality of Singapore-India relations.

Singapore's relations with India have had an influence on India's ties with South-east Asia, a region defined by its position south of China and east of India. Singapore has advocated closer ties between India and ASEAN, not to contain China – a view shared in New Delhi as well – but to balance a rising China in an Asian system marked by the relative decline of American power and a certain plateauing of Japanese influence.

India's admission to the ASEAN Regional Forum and its membership in the East Asian Summit process reflect Singapore's confidence in India's ability to play a stabilising role in the Asia-Pacific. Although Singapore's role in India's engagement with South-east Asia owes much to Mr Lee's successors, it was he who visualised India as playing a major strategic role in which military power would be based on economic power.

Mr Lee's reservations about Indian democracy must be seen in this light. Like India, Singapore follows the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy: In this sense, both countries are in the democratic camp. Democracy is indeed a strength of India, but it has the danger of paralysing economic policy and complicating foreign policy by bringing contentious domestic issues into play. Mr Lee wanted democratic India to have a benign international presence commensurate with its success in avoiding political extremes. As the Indian democracy matures against a backdrop of India's ris-



Friend to India

Mr Lee Kuan Yew nurtured relations between Singapore and India



Indian connection... (top) Mr Lee meeting then-Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi during a visit to India in 1966 and (above) speaking to then-Indian MPs (from left) Milind Deora, Shahid Siddiqui, Mohammad Salim, Rahul Gandhi and Jyotiraditya Scindia in 2005. (Left) with former Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh in 2011.
PHOTOS: PIB, THE STRAITS TIMES, LIANHE ZAOBAO

ing international profile, Mr Lee's hopes are coming closer to fulfilment.

The Singapore-India partnership that Mr Lee launched will remain a part of his successes as a statesman. Younger leaders in both countries should carry the relationship forward. That would be a fitting tribute to this remarkable leader and man.

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