



Cleanliness campaigns... just as Mr Lee did in the early years of Singapore (right), the Indian PM also took up the broom to launch the Swachh Bharat or Clean India programme. PHOTOS: IANS, THE STRAITS TIMES



#### K. KESAVAPANY

INDIAN prime minister Narendra Modi's presence in Singapore on March 29 for the funeral service of the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew set me thinking.

As one of the longest-serving prime ministers in the world, Mr Lee had met every one of India's prime ministers. He urged all of them to fulfil, in Pandit Nehru's words, India's Tryst with Destiny.

If Mr Lee had had a chance to meet Mr Modi, he would also have urged him to do the same. Both men would have found much in common in terms of transformational ideas. Let me cite a few:

One of Mr Lee's early priorities was the cleaning up of the Singapore River, indeed the cleaning up of all the country's waterways.

Setting a target of 20 years in which this was to be done, Mr Lee inspired his officials to transform some of the dirtiest waterways in Asia to the cleanest.

How this was achieved has been chronicled in numerous studies by international organisations and research institutes like the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, which has set up a dedicated Water Institute.

In the aftermath of the 2014 Indian General Elections, one of Mr Modi's early pledges was the cleaning up of the Ganges River, or Mother Ganges as she is reverently called. A mammoth task by any standard, the pledge reflects a frame of mind similar to that of Mr Lee – a clean environment is one of the most precious gifts a leader can bequeath to his people.

Just like Mr Lee did in the early years of Singapore, the Indian PM also took up the broom to launch the Swachh Bharat or Clean India programme.

Mr Modi would no doubt have come to know about Singapore's annual tree planting campaign. On Sept 1 every year, Mr Lee, Singapore's ministers and grassroots officials would fan out across the country to plant saplings. Visiting VIPs were also welcome to do the same at other times of the year. Close to a million trees have been planted, with Mr Lee having participated in every one of the tree planting campaigns.

Mr Modi too is keen to green India. In 2013, when he was chief

## Transformation gurus

### Indian PM Narendra Modi shares several of Mr Lee Kuan Yew's ideals in improving the lot of their people

minister of Gujarat, he called on the people to plant five trees at the birth of a girl child as an occasion of happiness and use its produce for the benefit of the girl in future. His government also sees tree planting as a means to employ jobless youths. Last year, after he came to power, his government announced plans to plant two billion trees along India's highways employing these youths.

When the British left Singapore, Mr Lee's government had to contend with one of the highest levels of unemployment in the world – 14 per cent of the workforce. To address this grave socio-economic problem, Mr Lee and his Cabinet colleagues, namely Dr Goh Keng Swee, took advice from Dr Albert Winsemius, a World Bank economist, to transform a piece of swampland called Jurong, in the western part of the country into an industrial estate. Attracting high-quality technology companies, with training institutes to supply skilled labour, Jurong fast became one of the most desired industrial real estates in the world.

India companies like Tata and Kirloskar were among the early movers into the estate, which is now called Jurong Town.

Similarly, Mr Modi plans to create 100 smart cities across India. The aim is for these cities to spur industrial and economic activity, with employment created for the highly-skilled Indian workforce. This can be truly regarded as one of PM Modi's major transformational ideas, which will change the face and future of India, just as Jurong did for Singapore.

In the realm of foreign policy, similarities of approach can be found in the early initiatives of Mr Lee and Mr Modi. Mr Lee believed that for economic progress to be made, regional peace and stability was a sine qua non. This was not an easy task to accomplish as South-east Asia had been a battleground for the colonial powers for over 300 years and in the 1940s was caught up in the World War II conflict between the Allied forces and Japan. The advent of the Sino-Soviet conflict and the fallout from the Vietnam War threatened to "Balkanise" the region.

Mr Lee and fellow regional leaders, notably president Suharto of Indonesia, established the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967. For the past five decades, ASEAN, regarded as one of the most successful political entities in the world, has helped to maintain this region as a "Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality". The presence of eight heads of government/state of the ASEAN countries at the funeral service was testimony to Mr Lee's signal contribution to the achievement of that goal.

Like Mr Lee, Mr Modi recognised peace as an essential prerequisite for South Asia's progress. Action following belief, he invited all heads of states and governments of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation to his oath-taking as prime minister. He followed this up with visits to neighbouring countries, with the Kingdom of Bhutan being his first as prime minister.

His visits to the US and Japan and his impending visit to China reflect a world view similar to that of Mr Lee – that these countries have to be engaged in order to meet the emerging challenges of the 21st century.

India's gesture of declaring a day of mourning, upon Mr Lee's demise, can be viewed as Mr Modi's personal tribute to Singapore's founding father. He told the media in Singapore that Mr Lee "inspired not just South-east Asia, but all of Asia, to believe in its own destiny".

Mr Modi described Mr Lee as a source of inspiration, whose "achievements and thoughts give me confidence in the possibility of India's own transformation".

• [tabla@sph.com.sg](mailto:tabla@sph.com.sg)

*K. Kesavapany is Singapore's non-resident Ambassador to Jordan and Distinguished Affiliated Fellow, Asian Research Institute, National University of Singapore.*