

By Invitation

To Singapore with love

I went from a milk programme for undernourished children, to a textile salesman, to the world of diplomacy, says the writer in this Thank You letter to Singapore.



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For The Straits Times

In a month's time, we will have massive public celebrations to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Singapore's independence. Let us complement these public demonstrations of affection with personal moments of reflection. What Singapore deserves today is 3 million thank you letters from its citizens. This is my personal thank you letter, sent with love to Singapore.

Dear Singapore, I want to thank you for transporting me from the bottom 20 per cent of the inhabitants of Planet Earth to the top 5 per cent.

As I was put on a special feeding programme when I joined Seraya Primary School in Primary 1 (drinking milk with a ladle from a pail in the principal's office), I must have belonged to the bottom 20 per cent. Today (as my friends tell me, both delicately and indelicately), I have gone from being undernourished to being overnourished. It has been a remarkable life journey. The only reason I made it to the top 5 per cent was because of a magical ladder Singapore created for the poor and disadvantaged. This is why I cannot possibly thank Singapore enough. And there are three key reasons why I do so.

Land of opportunity

It was a complete accident for me to be born in Singapore.

My parents, Mohan and Janki, were victims of the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. As Hindu Sindhis in Pakistan, they felt that they had to flee Pakistan. Their more than a dozen siblings also fled to all corners of the world.

Hence, as a young boy growing up in Singapore, I was in touch with first cousins in all corners of Planet Earth: in Suriname and Guyana in South America; in Nigeria and Ghana in Africa; in Mumbai, Hyderabad and Kolkata in India; and in Hong Kong and Japan in

Asia. I could easily have been born in any of these countries. Instead, by a complete accident, I was born in Singapore in 1948.

Little did I know then that I had won a "lottery" by being born in Singapore. The benefits of that "lottery" were felt as early as when I was six months old.

At that age, I was admitted to Paglar Maternity and Nursing Home, now Parkway East Hospital, in Telok Kurau. After a severe bout of diarrhoea, the doctors told my mother I was a gone case. Fortunately, I survived. Would I have survived this if I had been living in other Third World cities? My life should have followed the pattern of my first cousins'. Virtually all of them (with one or two exceptions) started working after secondary school. So did I. Fortunately, Singapore's meritocratic system thrust a President's Scholarship upon me in 1967. As the scholarship paid me \$250 a month, more than the \$150 I got as a textile salesman in High Street, my mother advised me to study in the then University of Singapore, in what is now the National University of Singapore Bukit Timah campus. (Let me, as an aside, mention that my first cousins did well, too, and most of them are far wealthier than me.)

Somewhat foolishly, after studying economics for two years, I decided to repeat a year (and my

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scholarship was suspended for a year) to study philosophy.

The Public Service Commission and Dr Toh Chin Chye, then vice-chancellor, could have said no to this foolish and impractical switch. Instead, they wisely said yes. My love of philosophy led to a lifelong passion for learning which has transported me to where I am today. Could this have happened equally easily in the rest of the Third World? Probably not.

This is why I am truly grateful to Singapore.

Land of multiracialism

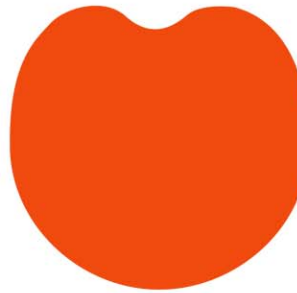
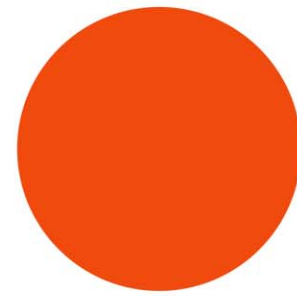
It is no secret that ethnic Indians have been born in all corners of the world. They have been born in Suriname and Guyana, Uganda and Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Fiji. Look carefully at this list of countries. In all these countries, small ethnic Indian communities have suffered various kinds of discrimination. The same could have happened in Singapore. Instead, the Indian community in Singapore has been truly blessed. They have been given equal access to housing and healthcare, education and employment. We take this for granted in Singapore. Yet, what we take for granted in Singapore is truly exceptional. Indians make up only 7.4 per cent of Singapore's population today. Yet, they have produced presidents and deputy prime ministers, Supreme Court judges and permanent secretaries. In per capita terms, the minority ethnic Indian community of Singapore may be the most successful minority ethnic Indian community globally (outside the ethnic Indian community in the United States, which is literally off-the-charts in its success).

Singapore's deep commitment to multiracialism and multiculturalism, in a world where ethnic and religious differences are becoming ever more polarised, is a true miracle. We take it for granted. This is good, because it shows that we have accepted, as a nation, that people of all races and cultures should be treated equally.

But we must also recognise that this is what makes Singapore magical and exceptional.

Land of inspiration

One of the great privileges of my life is that, like Professor Tommy Koh, I have served as Singapore's Ambassador to the United Nations (UN) twice. For more than 10 years, I interacted on a daily basis with



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ambassadors from all countries in the world. As a result of these deep daily interactions, I got a first-hand understanding of how other countries view Singapore.

There is no doubt that Singapore is one of the most highly respected countries on Planet Earth. I am not exaggerating. Even after leaving the Foreign Service, I have continued to travel to all corners of the world. It is a fair statement to say that I have friends in all corners. These friends are open and honest with me. Virtually all of them have communicated their deep respect for Singapore to me. They wish that their countries could emulate the Singapore success story. Just last month, I was in Kazakhstan. What is the Kazakh dream? To become the Singapore of Central Asia.

When Singapore became independent in 1965, no one – let me repeat this, no one – could have or would have predicted that Singapore would become one of the most highly respected and admired countries in the world.

Absorbing this respect and admiration on a daily basis as Singapore's Ambassador to the UN was one of the sweetest experiences of my life. And I am confident that I am not the only one to have experienced this extraordinary respect which Singapore enjoys as a nation.

Some readers will scoff at these three points and say that they reflect traditional propaganda. Yes, these points have been made over and over. What is remarkable is that these points are a true and valid description of Singapore.

All this does not mean that Singapore is a paradise. We are far from perfect. Many aspects of Singapore need serious improvement. We are not yet a gracious society. We are not the cleanest city, but the most-cleaned city. Our taxi system remains bewildering and unreliable in stormy weather. Despite the massive MRT breakdown on Tuesday, our MRT system has improved. Yet, it is far away from reaching First World Swiss standards. Our OB (out of bounds) markers on political discourse need to be widened, while the OB markers on discussion of racial and religious differences need to be narrowed to avoid the global polarisation seeping into our multicultural society. Our education system is clearly one of the best in the world, but it has not yet produced world-class minds who win Nobel Prizes. Why not? In short, we have a lot to do in the next 50 years to make Singapore an even better society.

Yet, it is also clear that we have achieved a lot in the first 50 years that deserve some truly magnificent celebrations. It is remarkable that we rank among the top nations in the world as a land of opportunity, a land of multiracialism and a land of inspiration.

Dear Singapore, this is why I cannot love you enough. You have given me – and millions of fellow Singaporeans – a truly magical life.

Yours sincerely,
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