

Close connections - past and present

The relationship between Singapore and India is marked by close trading and cultural ties that look set to grow even deeper. BY GOPINATH PILLAI

WHEN High Commissioner Jawed Ashraf requested me to write a short essay for the special supplement of *The Business Times* to commemorate 70 years of Indian Independence I readily agreed, although I was conscious of the difficulties writing anything about India because of its complexities.

Let me start with an overview of Singapore-India relations. Of all the states of East and South-east Asia, Singapore is best connected with India. Air connections, for example, between Singapore and India have been growing at a rapid pace. There are about seven flights a day between Chennai and Singapore alone. Furthermore, Singapore Airlines' joint venture with Tata in India operates an airline, and another joint venture has an airline catering operation in India. It is not inconceivable that Singapore Airlines or other entities may consider other joint ventures.

India is one of Singapore's major trading partners. Singapore is the largest or second largest investor in India depending on which of the most current statistics you use. Major Singapore companies like Temasek, Sembcorp, Ascendas and YCH have large investments in India. India in my view also gives attractive returns to those in portfolio investment.

Apart from these, there are also a number of mainly Singapore Indian investors whose investments may not be reflected in the official statistics because they establish companies directly in India through which they start or become partners in sizeable operations. This group perhaps has the best knowledge of the Indian business scene because of the extensive networks they develop. However, these well connected businessmen have not been courted by other Singapore companies to enter India.

One of the largest projects being planned is the building of the capital city of Amaravati in Andhra Pradesh.



Artistes from different Indian communities coming together for a performance at the Indian Cultural Fiesta which was held at Campbell Lane and the Indian Heritage Centre in April 2017. FILE PHOTO

This will be an iconic project which will have positive impact on the relationship between the two countries.

Two institutions in Singapore that add depth to Singapore's relationship with India are the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) and the Indian Heritage Centre (IHC). ISAS is a think tank and research institute which is prolific in its output of papers analysing current developments in India and other South Asian countries. It also holds conferences, seminars, workshops and public talks and closed sessions. ISAS has made it possible for Singaporeans to understand India better.

IHC, established mainly with government fund which is a sizeable amount, concentrates on cultural her-

itage of Indians and other South Asians. There are many other institutions which work on their own or in collaboration with Indian organisations or individuals to create a full calendar of cultural activities.

Now let me move to the second part of my topic which is about Singaporean Indians who have been in this region for centuries. They came as traders, police and army personnel, professionals such as teachers and accountants and a very large number of indentured labourers. The physical construction of early Singapore, like the St Andrew's Cathedral, was done by indentured labour from India.

Like all other communities, Indians have gone through a transformation in the last 50 years. Education

has led to an increase in the number of Indians in professions such as law, accountancy and medicine.

Indians have been active in trade unions and politics since colonial times. Their influence in politics waned after voting was made compulsory in the 1950s. However, the Group Representation Constituency system has helped to maintain significant minority representation in Parliament.

When Singapore's founding prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, stepped down in 1990, the Indian community hosted a farewell dinner for him and presented him a book entitled *A Place in the Sun*. The inference was that Mr Lee had made it possible for Indians to have a place in the Singapore sun.

This sums up the position of most of the Indians but not all. There is much more work to be done to help those who feel disenfranchised. Voluntary organisations like Sinda and Singapore Indian Education Trust are doing excellent work to help those who are in need of help.

What of the future? I asked my grandsons, Arjuna and Aditya, aged 14 and 10, who have visited India and some parts of South-east Asia and Europe. Their verdict was that Singapore was the best place to live in but India was "a very interesting" place to visit. "Where else can you see such free movement of animals, elephants, cattle, goats and monkeys, all roaming around being fed by ordinary people. You suddenly realise how

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cruel it is to put these creatures in a cage."

Let me make one final observation before I end. Indians generally are good at learning languages. It would be good for them to use this talent to get a working knowledge of the language of the 75 per cent of Singaporeans which is Mandarin.

There is the danger that without the knowledge of Mandarin, Indians can become marginalised in spite of the fact that Singapore has a multi-cultural society. Mandarin must be learnt in addition to English, of course, and one Indian language. Singapore Indians can be a strong link between Singapore and India. This can only be fully realised if Singapore Indians can effectively communicate with the major racial groups in Singapore.

Finally, may I take this opportunity on this 70th anniversary of its independence to wish India and its people a great future in the years ahead.

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