

# Gandhi's NUS dialogue draws polarising views

Indian National Congress leader in town to court diaspora before India polls

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A preview of the battle that will grip India when it goes to the polls next year played out before an audience at the National University of Singapore yesterday when Mr Rahul Gandhi took questions from the floor.

Mr Gandhi, the son, grandson and great-grandson of a line of prime ministers from India's Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, is in Singapore to court the influential Indian diaspora as his Indian National Congress party aims to challenge the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party in elections due to be held by May next year.

At times, questions at the dialogue organised by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy veered towards the combative.

"Why is it that during the years that your family ruled India, India's per capita income grew at less than the world average, and has grown faster since your family relinquished power," asked someone who introduced himself as an economist and the writer of a book on the economic history of Asia.

As the audience of nearly 300 at NUS Faculty of Law strained to hear Mr Gandhi's response, he seemed to take a measure of the questioner, then shot back: "And what is your hypothesis?"

"Do you agree that India is a success today? And you are saying I have no role?"

As the moderator, Professor Danny Quah, the Acting Dean of the LKYSPP, tried to keep the conversation cordial, the next question turned the tables.

"My India is lost, I can't find India on the map anymore," a man said, asking Mr Gandhi to "restore" India to what it was before Mr Narendra Modi came to power in 2014.

Mr Gandhi, 47, seized the moment to define himself as the moderate, liberal alternative to the nationalistic Mr Modi.

"This conversation shows you the polarisation. That gentleman thinks nothing worthwhile has ever been done by the Congress party. This gentleman thinks everything has been done by the Congress party."

"Let me tell you what the truth is: India's success is hugely because of the Indian people... Anybody in this room who thinks that the Congress party is not part of that success... needs to write a new book."



India's Congress party president Rahul Gandhi during a visit to the Singapore Indian Association yesterday. TNP PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

As the audience broke out in applause, Mr Gandhi ticked off his party's achievements in the nearly four decades it was in power – leading its independence struggle, achieving self-sufficiency in food production and liberalising the economy.

"I feel no animosity towards somebody who says I have achieved nothing," he added. "I respect your opinion."

"But notice something else: You would never have the ability to say what you said to me in

front of Mr Modi."

During his three-day visit that concludes today, Mr Gandhi is expected to call on Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam.

Yesterday, he met Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and also held discussions with Temasek CEO Ho Ching and its board, as well as with entrepreneurs of Indian origin.

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