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INDIA

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By Sreeram Chaulia

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The special status that Narendra Modi places on Lee Kuan Yew as leader of an Asian nation makes his second visit as Indian prime minister to Singapore special. In March, he had attended Lee's funeral and described him as a "lion among leaders" and "a global thinker who saw things ahead of others".

The awe and admiration Modi has for Lee was built over earlier encounters when the former was Gujarat chief minister and the latter was minister mentor of Singapore. When the



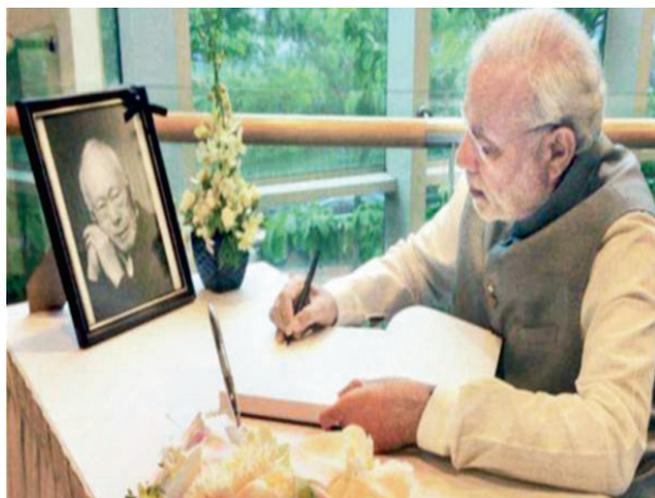
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western world had shut its doors to Modi in 2006, he found in Lee a gracious host and a facilitator of business linkages with Gujarat.

Like most ardent admirers of Lee, Modi has asked himself how a man could ‘miraculously’ convert a divided, post-colonial backwater into a sleek financial powerhouse in one generation. It would be no exaggeration to state that Modi fashions himself after Lee with the same focus on achieving India’s modernisation through state-guided capitalism backed up by efficient governance, zero corruption and an emphasis on technological solutions.

Like the founder of Singapore, who perfected the art of conducting foreign policy that would contribute greatly to Singapore’s economic benefit, Modi, too, is spearheading India’s external relations to make the outside environment as conducive as possible to resolve India’s internal bottlenecks.



Singapore is a pivotal partner not just for India’s ‘Act East’ policy but, in a larger sense, a motor of India’s ascent. Modi is a firm believer in

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transfer of capital, knowhow and best practices from around the world, which can then be adapted to Indian conditions. He will conclude with his counterpart Lee Hsien Loong two of the 'five S' pillars of the 'strategic partnership' — smart cities and skill development — during his visit.

Singapore has already designed the masterplan for the development of the new Andhra Pradesh capital Amravati. Modi will be looking to extend this public policy cooperation to remake the face of urban India. His tour of Singapore's Institute of Technical Education (ITE) will concretise its contribution to the 'Skill India' programme of equipping youth from socio-economically underprivileged backgrounds with vocational knowledge for self-employment.

Indian chambers of commerce have identified science and technology as well as education as two sectors where there is vast potential for Singapore to invest in India. Modi's developmental agenda aims to tap Singapore's leading attributes in these fields.

Until 2005, Singapore accounted for only 3% of FDI entering India. Today, that figure has gone up to 10% and Singapore is the second-largest investor in India. Indian companies have also made a beeline to open offices in Singapore thanks to its tax-friendly environment and its unparalleled advantage of hosting other global corporations which are based in the city-state.



Modi's stated ambition is to scale up investment and trade, capitalising on Singapore's unique attribute as a hub for payments, logistics and trans-shipment of Indian exports to the Asean region. One of the high-profile events scheduled during Modi's Singapore stay this time is his address to the Indian community at the Singapore Expo Centre.

Indian Singaporeans, a majority of them being Tamils, comprise 9% of the population and have often overachieved in terms of representation in government and parliament in the Lion City. Modi will be wooing to not just reconnect them to India's economic growth saga but also to recognise and strengthen their positions as positive influences in Singaporean society.

They are the umbilical bonds that make the Singapore-India people-to-people relationship so personal. They also ensure a balance in Singapore's strategic outlook in Asia.

With defence cooperation, especially in the maritime and counter-terrorism realms, also being upgraded, it is not an exaggeration to claim that Modi is laying the foundation for a robust, modernisation-centred strategic partnership.

Just as there is a Little India in Singapore, there will be a Big Singapore in Indian hearts and minds as our bonds mature.

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