

Using Singapore for India's benefit

There are a vast variety of areas where the Singaporean experience is actually more relevant for India than the Western experience



Singapore is already No.1 in a variety of areas: in its port and airport, health and education systems, housing and urban planning. Photo: Bloomberg

Logically speaking, India and Singapore should not be close. The Indian elites, partly as a result of British colonization, have long looked West for inspiration. London and New York were inspirational capitals. For decades, tiny Singapore was not in Indian sights.

Yet, quite amazingly, the second most populous country in the world, India, has now developed an amazingly close relationship with one of the tiniest countries, Singapore. A high level of trust exists between the private and public sector elites in the two countries. All this happened despite the fact that India and Singapore occasionally took opposing positions during the Cold War. Nor do India and Singapore share much ethnic affinity, even though the Indian minority in Singapore is strong and visible.

It is never easy to explain historical aberrations. Several people and processes have contributed to this amazingly close relationship. The then-prime minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong, pulled off a geopolitical miracle when he got India admitted as an Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) dialogue partner in 1995 despite Malaysian and Indonesian concerns that Asean should not show India

preference over Pakistan.

S. Jayakumar's book, *Diplomacy*, has explained well how this diplomatic coup came about.

I was the foreign secretary of Singapore when this happened. So I knew at first-hand how grateful the Indian government was. One good thing led to another and now India and Singapore have signed a variety of economic (Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement), defence and cultural agreements. Yet, even though the relationship today is very close, it is still not close enough. There is still a great amount of potential that can be exploited for mutual benefit.

To understand this potential, just look at how much China has benefited from Singapore. India can benefit just as much. A simple analogy may explain how. Singapore has clearly become one of the most successful nations in human history. It has succeeded, like Japan, by learning best practices from all over the world. As a result, Singapore has fully imbibed the virus of modernization. Closer contact between India and Singapore will lead to the faster transfer of this healthy virus of modernization into the Indian body politic.

Deng Xiaoping, probably the greatest leader of the 20th century, figured this out in 1978. He saw that tiny Singapore had done a great job of adopting and adapting global best practices in a vast variety of fields: health and education; housing and transport; ports and airports. Being the world's leading pragmatist, he saw immediately that China could take a massive shortcut by learning global best practices from Singapore. Hence, in 1978, he encouraged thousands of senior officials to learn from Singapore. And thousands of Chinese delegations came to Singapore. The rest, as they say, is history.

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi comes to Singapore, he should emulate Deng Xiaoping and call for a similar learning from Singapore. And there are a vast variety of areas where the Singaporean experience is actually more relevant for India than the Western experience.

Take the area of world-class comprehensive research universities. Large India has none. Tiny Singapore has two—National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU)—which are in the top league globally.

India could go and learn from Harvard and Yale, Oxford and Cambridge. But they took centuries to get to where they are. By contrast, when I studied in NUS in the 1960s, it was a typical third-world university. Today, it is first-world. Singapore took many short cuts. India can follow them.

There is an even faster way to transfer the virus of modernization from Singapore to India: it can encourage more Singaporeans to visit India. In theory, India is right in insisting on reciprocity of visas. Singapore imposed visas on Indians. India, therefore, imposed visas on Singaporeans (even though visa-on-arrival is available at a few airports). What this kind of reciprocity fails to acknowledge is that 3.2 million Singapore citizens will be a drop in the Indian population if they all choose to visit India. But tiny Singapore clearly does not have room to accommodate 1.3 billion Indians.

Instead of using reciprocity as the principle, India should do a simple cost-benefit analysis of giving Singaporeans visa-free entry. The calculation will be very simple. There will be virtually no costs (just loss of visa fee revenue) but there will be massive benefits, especially if this is combined with an open skies agreement between India and Singapore. The result will be a significant increase of Singaporeans, especially Singaporean businessmen, visiting India. The business benefits should not be underestimated. Tiny Singapore is now the No.1 foreign investor in China.

Many Singaporeans will go to India looking for business opportunities. When they engage in business in India, they will also bring along a vast variety of global best practices that Singapore has already imbibed. Singapore is already No.1 in a variety of areas: in its port and airport, health and education systems, housing and urban planning (but not in its mass rapid transit system).

Many of these successes can be transferred through a process of osmosis if greater contact can be encouraged between the two countries. In theory, this could happen spontaneously. In practice, it requires leadership, both political and intellectual. On the latter front, the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy will be happy to make a major contribution. Working with a strong Indian partner institution, we could develop wild out-of-the-box ideas to develop new contours of cooperation between India and Singapore. For example, Singapore is a natural partner for the 100 Smart Cities initiative. The potential is enormous. Prime Minister Modi should aim to seize this potential when he comes to Singapore.

Kishore Mahbubani is dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore.