Why India needs to take S'pore seriously

By TARUN DAS
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THIS tiny city-state has about five million people. Is it relevant to India of one billion-plus? There are 10 reasons why India needs to take Singapore seriously. And there is no better time to understand this than now, as Singapore's Prime Minister visits New Delhi this week, in a current Indian environment damaged by scams, tax policies, declining values, continuing poverty and societal discord.

■ The first lesson is about strong institutions – the backbone of society. Singapore is as young, or as old, as India. It has set up and sustained its institutions, which were a shared strength with India. But India has seen an erosion and weakness in its institutions. Rebuilding these, and learning how Singapore has ensured sustainability, is a key lesson.

■ Second, Singapore's growing strength in international arbitration services. In a world of disputes and litigation, a lower-cost, efficient means of settling issues is through independent arbitration, previously dominated by London and Paris. Singapore is clearly useful to India, with its multiplicity of legal services firms, practitioners and legal infrastructure, subject to huge delays.

■ Third, the open Singapore economy, based on free trade, minimal duties and taxes, promoting strong compliance. Backed by speedy decisions, firm justice and an easy operating environment, it is attracting over 5,000 Indian companies to locate in Singapore.

In Singapore, a company can be registered online in less than a day. India could emulate this only with a 30-day time limit. This is about "will" and using information technology (India's core competence!) for all "paperwork". The creation of a simple, exemption-free, non-discriminatory system would benefit India and rebuild confidence in its economy.

■ Fourth, Singapore is a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multicultural society. Special initiatives ensure integration and societal connectivity. India's complex society needs similar initiatives to bring back its communal harmony. This needs sustained action, going beyond reservations and quotas.

Poverty is a connected challenge in India, especially the basic need of shelter – a home. Singapore's low-cost housing model is an example of providing the poor with their own homes, providing security and a sense of ownership to families across communities. An important area for India to learn, adapt and apply on a decentralised, distributed basis.

■ Fifth, India has to skill 500 million young people by 2022. Initiatives are under way to multiply skills development capacity. Singapore has the most amazing institutions providing skills training, led by its Institute of Technical Education (ITE) network. An ITE in each Indian state, with Singapore's collaboration, would transform quality skills-building.

■ Sixth, since Indian independence, planning has been a centrepiece of government activity. Singapore has a planning system but more importantly, a process of introspecting, reinventing itself and strategising. For example, a couple of years ago, an expert group reframed its strategic priorities – a process relevant to India. A national strategy document, public debate, adoption and regular review is relevant to India.

India's plans and policies are strong on "what" to do, but less so on "how" to do so. Singapore, on the other hand, is meticulous in its planning of everything, from institutions to museums to think-tanks. Delay occurs because of the insistence on the "how", but the success rate is high and implementation is credible.

■ Seventh, Indian cities are enormously stressed by population burdens, and demand for infrastructure and services. Urban development in India could have no better model than Singapore, especially for the 1,000 towns in the making.

■ Eighth, India has a water crisis. Singapore has limited water of its own. Learning how to approach this issue is critical. From conservation and recycling to management of water resources, India has much to learn from Singapore and to collaborate, including technology to deal with water challenges. Water supply for all can then be a reality in India.

■ Ninth, what strikes a visitor to Singapore is the "green" and "clean" dimension. India's environmental wealth is enormous but the degradation and destruction is widespread.

Singapore is a "clean" country, with garbage and litter unseen. This is a managerial and awareness issue. India, on the other hand, has garbage everywhere, including the rural areas. India can be "clean" and "green" by taking specific steps from Singapore's example.

Discipline and work culture do not come automatically. These have to be inculcated, with leaders setting the example. This is Singapore's strength. This is India's need – an important area of learning and partnership.

■ Finally, Singapore strongly supported India's participation at the East Asia Summit, and is India's bridge to East Asia; in fact, to the world. This is why another 1,000 Indian companies will use Singapore as a base. India's first Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement was with Singapore and was highly successful in multiplying trade and investment. The future looks positive for bilateral trade, and needs special priority because the potential is huge.

There are many other areas of cooperation; for example, in education, defence, innovation, health, technology and science.

The India-Singapore agenda is incredible, and mutual. When prime ministers Manmohan Singh and Lee Hsien Loong sit down together this week in New Delhi, they have much to discuss. This is a very special relationship with enormous future potential.

Multiplication must be the name of the game.

The writer headed the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) in India for over 30 years, stepping down as chief mentor in 2009. The CII has international offices in several countries, including Singapore, China and the United States.

Delhi residents awaiting tankers amid a water crisis. In the management of water resources, India has much to learn from Singapore. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS