

Reproduced from *Looking East To Look West: Lee Kuan Yew's Mission India* by Sunanda K. Datta-Ray (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009). This version was obtained electronically direct from the publisher on condition that copyright is not infringed. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the prior permission of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Individual articles are available at < <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg> >

# LOOKING EAST TO LOOK WEST

The **Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)** was established as an autonomous organization in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute's research programmes are the Regional Economic Studies (RES, including ASEAN and APEC), Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS).

**ISEAS Publishing**, an established academic press, has issued almost 2,000 books and journals. It is the largest scholarly publisher of research about Southeast Asia from within the region. ISEAS Publishing works with many other academic and trade publishers and distributors to disseminate important research and analyses from and about Southeast Asia to the rest of the world.

# LOOKING EAST TO LOOK WEST

Lee Kuan Yew's  
Mission India

SUNANDA K. DATTA-RAY

**LSEAS**

INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES  
Singapore

PENGUIN  
VIKING

PENGUIN BOOKS  
India

First published in Singapore in 2009 by  
ISEAS Publishing  
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies  
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Pasir Panjang  
Singapore 119614

for distribution in all countries except India.

*E-mail:* [publish@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:publish@iseas.edu.sg)  
*Website:* <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

This is a reprint edition published by arrangement with the original publisher, Viking, Penguin Books India, and for sale outside the Indian Subcontinent.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publishers.

Copyright © Sunanda K. Datta-Ray 2009

*The responsibility for facts and opinions in this publication rests exclusively with the author and his interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or the policy of the publishers or their supporters.*

---

#### ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

---

Datta-Ray, Sunanda K., 1937-

Looking east to look west : Lee Kuan Yew's Mission India.

1. Lee, Kuan Yew, 1923- —Interviews.
2. Singapore—Relations—India.
  - I. India—Relations—Singapore.
  - II. Title.

DS610.47 I4D23                      2009

ISBN 978-981-4279-04-8 (soft cover)  
ISBN 978-981-4279-30-7 (E-book PDF)

---

Typeset by Eleven Arts, New Delhi  
Printed in Singapore by Utopia Press Pte Ltd

# Contents

---

<i>Foreword by Pranab Mukherjee</i>	vii
<i>Foreword by George Yeo</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
1. 'MM's Strategy, Goh Chok Tong's Stamina'	19
2. Chinatown Spelt 'Singapur'	46
3. Asia's 'Coca-Cola Governments'	73
4. 'An Absolute Pariah in the Whole World'	101
5. India's 'Monroe Doctrine for Asia'	131
6. 'India Alone Can Look China in the Eye'	158
7. Goh's Folly to Goh's Glory with Tata	185
8. 'The Lowest Point in Bilateral Relations'	212
9. 'Scent of the S'pore Dollar'	239
10. Singapore's 'Mild India Fever'	266
11. End of One Honeymoon, Start of Another?	293
12. Shaping the Asian Century	319
<i>Notes</i>	346
<i>Index</i>	377





सत्यमेव जयते

प्रणव मुखर्जी

PRANAB MUKHERJEE



जय हिन्द

विदेश मंत्री, भारत  
MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS  
INDIA

## Foreword

India's Look East Policy is now a decade and half old. Its path, vigour and promise has given us renewed confidence in India's Asian destiny. Without doubt, this is Asia's century and India is proud to be part of an energetic process that has seen impressive growth across the continent. In this historical evolution in the new century, leaders across the continent have contributed, learnt with experience and evolved new approaches.

Amongst those leaders, the name of Lee Kuan Yew must rank near the top. A distinguished statesman and a system designer par excellence, Lee Kuan Yew has always impressed me with his determination, which is suffused with deep insights into the world around him. Having steered Singapore with a focus that is unique, he has today become a living legend for enabling growth through entrepreneurship and clear direction. This book throws light on Lee Kuan Yew's admiration, belief, curiosity and desire for engagement with India over the years. Undoubtedly, his abiding interest in India over the decades, tinged with expectations, finds reflection in some of the achievements that have been posted by India. A mirror image of this multifaceted expectation finds form today as components that have helped craft India's Look East Policy.

That policy, however, is predated by the much more important connection between India and Singapore, which was established more than a thousand years ago. India's ancient links with the region were nurtured on the waves of trade and culture and found both spiritual as well as concrete expression through the architecture of some of the temples in South East Asia, many of which stand to this day. The characteristic Asian treasure of spirituality is one of the strongest contributors to our links. In the current context, this has found expression in the significant



सत्यमेव जयते

प्रणव मुखर्जी

PRANAB MUKHERJEE



जय हिन्द

: 2 :

विदेश मंत्री, भारत  
MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS  
INDIA

support being shown by Singapore for the revival of the Nalanda University. In a way, this is the completion of a virtuous circle enabling us to begin the second chapter of our relationship with greater confidence.

Relations between India and Singapore have always been marked by a significant degree of closeness, not only at the Government level, but in the private sector too. It is well known that the foundations of Singapore's industrialization were laid in 1972 when the Tatas helped in setting up the first technical training institute and a precision tools manufacturing plant in the island. In fields as widely separated as diplomacy and airline management, India has had the opportunity to assist Singapore in capacity building.

Today, we see the visible effects of the process started then. The recently concluded Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement concluded in 2005 arose as a result of the development of close relations with ASEAN in general and Singapore in particular. One example would suffice: today, there are 172 flights that connect Singapore to various cities in India per week. This is the result of the persistence in vision and the focus that Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew personifies.

To bring together the multiple strands of this complex relationship, there is no better a person than Sunanda K. Datta Ray. Sunanda is distinctly qualified to write this book. As Editor of The Statesman, one of the leading newspapers published from Kolkata, Sunanda made sure that the newspaper gave adequate space to cover news about countries east of India. The Statesman itself has a hoary tradition, having been originally incorporated as "The Friend of India" in 1818 one year ahead of the establishment of Singapore as a trading post in 1819. Incidentally, the business affairs of Singapore were conducted till 1867 from Kolkata!





सत्यमेव जयते

प्रणव मुखर्जी

PRANAB MUKHERJEE



विदेश मंत्री, भारत  
MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS  
INDIA

: 3 :

The experience has stood Sunanda in good stead. Now, having lived for nearly a decade in Singapore as a journalist and a researcher, the message of his book is that even if friendship takes time to crystallize, it is the foundation that lends it the energy. The contributions of India's political leaders over the years, as brought out in the book, constitute these foundational elements. The launch of the Look East Policy was perhaps "the decisive moment", to borrow a phrase from photographer Henry Cartier Bresson. With this book by Sunanda, we now have a volume that starts today, reveals the past, and points to what new heights can be attained.

Pranab Mukherjee  
Minister of External Affairs  
Government of India

New Delhi  
9 June 2008





## FOREWORD

1. After meeting Rahul Gandhi in October 2007, Lee Kuan Yew remarked thoughtfully to some Singapore ministers that he knew Rahul's father, grandmother and great grandfather. Having lived so long and observed at close range India's complex recovery of its sense of self after independence in 1947, Lee Kuan Yew has a unique longitudinal perspective of India's development in the last 60 years. He was happy to give extended interviews to Sunanda Datta-Ray for this book.

2. Singapore's relationship with India of course goes back much longer. The name Singapore itself is of Sanskrit origin. Singapore is at the heart of Southeast Asia. Located at the southernmost tip of Eurasia, it is where ships sailing beneath the trade winds between the two oceans have to turn. As the flows of trade ebbed and flowed over the centuries, they left on the shores of Southeast Asia aspects of Indian civilization. Southeast Asia is where the traditions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata remain alive and thriving outside India, albeit in somewhat different forms. It was through Southeast Asia that Buddhism travelled by sea to China, Korea and Japan. It was for the China trade that the British East India Company established Singapore as a trading post in 1819. Modern Singapore is a daughter city of Kolkata from where Singapore was administered until 1867. That Bengali link was reactivated when Subhas Chandra Bose established the Indian National Army in Singapore during the Second World War. In a new age of globalisation in the 21st century, it should not be surprising at all that an old but persistent relationship should be refurbished and refreshed. When explaining the reasons for the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement with India, I tell my Indian friends half in jest that all it does is to restore the position of the Raj when trade flowed freely, standards were similar and professionals were able to move across jurisdictions with relative ease.

3. In Lee Kuan Yew's India, Datta-Ray chronicles Singapore's re-engagement of an India which, after decades of introspection, is once again looking outwards. Years ago, Lee Kuan Yew knew instinctively that India

would one day open up and recover its position on the global stage but the question was always when? That Singapore took an early position on India before many other countries did was not because we were smarter or had better information but because India has always been a part of us. We could feel it in our bones. Having lived many years in Singapore, Datta-Ray understands this and it shows in the way he tells the story. As a relatively late participant, I could relate to many of the observations he makes but it is perhaps only to be expected that the images that come through the lenses of another person should sometimes look a little different from those I myself registered.



GEORGE YEO

## A c k n o w l e d g e m e n t s

A book like this, drawing heavily on interviews and informal chats, is something of a collective effort. The list of persons in Singapore and India to whom I am indebted is, therefore, enormous. Some of them may not even have been aware of dropping pearls of wisdom that were picked up and pocketed. It would be invidious to publish their names. But it is only right to admit that much of the flavour of the India–Singapore dialogue over the years derives from these conversations.

It all came about quite fortuitously because of a call on Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew in 2005. A generous fellowship at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, for which I am deeply grateful to the director, Ambassador K. Kesavapany—universally known by the affectionate diminutive of Pany—made it possible for my wife and me to return to Singapore for eighteen enjoyable months during which, thanks to Colonel Lee Seow Hiang, then MM’s Principal Private Secretary, I was able to engage MM in seven long, informal, free-ranging, recorded conversations. Including the first unstructured but also recorded chat, there were thus eight sessions. That made a change from my first visit to Singapore in 1976 (for London’s *Observer* newspaper to the fury of the paper’s resident correspondent, Dennis Bloodworth, whose bitterness over my assignment was simmering even twelve years later when he wrote his memoirs), when I cooled my heels for a week in Raffles Hotel without being granted an interview by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, as he was then. I did, however, meet Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam, who was dismissive about non-alignment. Taking me to the window, Rajaratnam pointed to

the harbour and said Singapore would be lost if the Americans didn't keep her informed about possibly hostile vessels that berthed there.

That is the raw material of this book. Only Colonel Lee sat in on the meetings, though my son, Deep Kisor, joined us for the last session and MM responded to his inputs with the gracious forbearance with which he put up with my inquisitiveness about times long past. Only once did he explode, exclaiming that I was prodding him about things that had happened forty or fifty years ago. Otherwise, he was unreservedly patient and forthcoming about what might be called the software of contemporary history.

It is generally assumed that files hold the key to understanding how governments think and act. B.V.R. Subrahmanyam, then a senior member of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's office, says files do not disclose intent. That emerges only from conversation with people, something that many academic researchers tend to overlook. People animate government. Some people are more powerful than others, and a few are powerful enough to make and execute policy. But even the most powerful do not operate in isolation. And so, I have supplemented Lee Kuan Yew's obiter dicta with an exhaustive series of interviews with officials and politicians in India and Singapore who fleshed out the relationship. At the same time, I have not neglected other evidence, spending many months scanning official documents, newspaper records, and the books and other paper traces left by the men and women who played some part in the story.

Most of the people I interviewed appear in the pages that follow; the endnotes acknowledge their wisdom and insight. Not thanking them individually does not mean I do not appreciate the time they gave me or the care with which they answered questions. Only a very few of my informants are not named, and that is entirely their choice. There are others, like Gopinath Pillai, businessman, diplomat and raconteur, whom I did not ever specifically interview but who is one of those who bring colour and liveliness to any subject they discuss. Just chatting with Gopi filled many gaps in my knowledge and supplied many unsuspected details. How else would I have known that *congee*, Chinese porridge, is also an Indian word like Mandarin (*mantri*), being derived from our *kanchi*, starch? I had been unaware till then of the Chinese debt to India! There was much else in that vein.

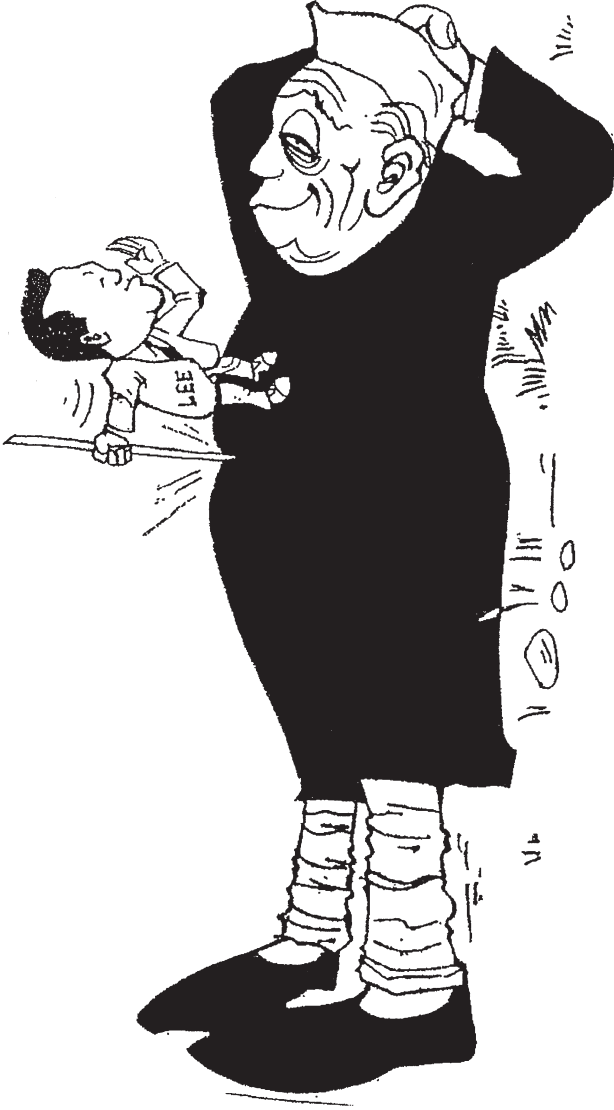
Named or not, my informants are the supporting cast around

MM. Non-players were also invaluable. Apart from the service that the ISEAS library assistants readily provided, a working day at the institute would have been dull indeed without the cheerful radiance with which Kamala and Mr Tee (no other names were ever used for these two delightful and indispensable persons) enlivened routine. A special thank you is due to the Singapore Press Holdings Resource Centre. With no obligation save of long association, Gokelam Ponniah Achary was like a personal research assistant, looking up and e-mailing back to me within minutes of my mentioning some story that had appeared in the *Straits Times* (or some other publication) many years ago, and of which I had only a vague recollection. She continued her help even after my ISEAS fellowship ended and I returned to Calcutta to continue working on the manuscript, and then in London where I read the proofs. Sonny Yap Thiam Por, friend and colleague, was also unstinting with information, though immersed in his own labours over a history of the People's Action Party.

None of this would have happened if President S.R. Nathan of Singapore ('smooth, soft and suave' in the words of an Indian diplomat) had not taken an interest in the project even before it began. His encouragement and the hospitality he and Mrs Urmila Nathan, whose family had migrated to Malaya from our part of India, extended, made a great difference to my wife and me during our stay in Singapore.

Being a scholar, unlike his father, Deep Kisor gave me the benefit of his academic insights. But there would have been no book without my wife's contribution. While some ISEAS colleagues urged me to engage a student aide (at my cost!) Sumita plugged in a pair of earphones, inserted the tapes and sat for hours on end, day after day, listening and transcribing. Not only tapes of long interviews with Lee Kuan Yew but of all my conversations in India and Singapore. By the end she must have trumped the expertise of Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady* in being able to detect and decipher the many distinctive accents that give Singlish, Hinglish and all the other Englishes of our two countries a special resonance.

Several friends read parts of the manuscript and made useful suggestions. The one to whom I am especially grateful is Kanti Bajpai for taking time off from packing for Oxford to pore over every line and word. His advice helped to iron out many infelicities that affected the theme as well as the conclusions for which I alone bear responsibility.



Anand

'Stand up'

Courtesy Hindustan Times

(See pages 151-52)



## Introduction

Within moments of proclaiming Singapore independent on 9 August 1965, Lee Kuan Yew, the tiny island republic's first prime minister and architect of its phenomenal growth, wrote to India's prime minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, seeking military assistance. Shastri, whom he had met in New Delhi three months earlier, ignored the appeal. Other rebuffs followed. Singaporean fishing craft were routinely arrested for straying into Indian territorial waters. India turned down Singapore's request to use the Nicobar Islands for defence training. A proposal to import sand from the Andaman Islands was similarly rejected. India sold arms and ammunition to Malaysia during anti-Chinese rioting there when Singapore feared an influx of refugees across the Causeway linking the two countries. India also questioned Singapore's decision to provide facilities to American troops when the Philippines bases were closed. Mistrust and misgivings were not confined to one side. Goh Chok Tong, who became prime minister in 1990 when Lee 'stepped aside' with the designation of Senior Minister or SM, warned twice that an American withdrawal from Asia would encourage hegemonic India with an increasing military reach.

Four decades after the abortive appeal to Shastri, India and Singapore are poised to realize Lee's early vision of restoring the seamless unity of what the Ramayana called Suvarnabhumi, Land of Gold (also known as Suvarnadwipa, Isle of Gold). His unspoken Mission India, which inspired and guided his successors, eventually also struck a responsive chord in New Delhi. Four unprecedented agreements promise to erase strategic and economic boundaries, and

transform the Little Red Dot (an Indonesian president's derisive term for the Chinese island in an Islamic sea) into the doorway to a huge Indian hinterland and India's springboard for the world. Three defence agreements provide for joint military training, exercises and other professional exchanges between the Indian and the Singaporean armed forces. The arrangement might be 'a small step for dynamic little Singapore whose military units are scattered around the globe' but represents 'a giant step for India's relatively opaque, inflexible and bureaucratic defence sector.'<sup>1</sup> It is 'certainly . . . a major, major step' for India, agrees Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, because 'India never used to allow such things.'<sup>2</sup> The younger Lee succeeded Goh in 2004 as Singapore's third prime minister when his father, Lee Kuan Yew assumed the style of Minister Mentor, MM, and Goh became the new SM.

As momentous as the defence agreements of 2003, 2005 and 2007, the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement signed in 2005 heralds 'a larger process of Asian integration'.<sup>3</sup> Ceca's 'pre-establishment' clause—entitling Singapore-registered enterprises to be treated at par with Indian companies—can revitalize India's economy with a flood of funds from abroad while guaranteeing Singapore permanent middleman's fees. The agreement is expected to push up bilateral trade to more than US\$50 billion by 2010, increase Singapore's cumulative investment in India to US\$10 billion by 2015, and enable more Indian firms to follow the Tatas and Punj Lloyd in acquiring companies in Singapore.<sup>4</sup>

Historians are silent about this revolutionary transformation after decades of hesitation, suspicion and misunderstanding. The saga of a relationship that straddles the frontiers of foreign and domestic affairs, history and culture, politics and personality, public and private life, remains an untold story. It challenges established perceptions, dissolves prejudices and dispels the notion that international relations is the product of textbook theories and calculations. This book demonstrates that international relations are also determined by individuals, as much to meet national requirements as to realize their own ideals. The title, *Looking East to Look West: Lee Kuan Yew's Mission India*, reflects both the sophistication of P.V. Narasimha Rao's Look East strategy and Lee's vision of India as an Asian player

long before Indians turned again to their ancient footprints in the Sri Vijaya and Majapahit empires. Indeed, Singapore looms so large today in India's public consciousness only because of Lee's robust proselytization. As Sellappan Rama Nathan, a former civil servant who became president of Singapore in 1999, says, he 'was trying all along to woo India to play a bigger role in South-east Asia.'<sup>5</sup> He constantly badgered India's leaders to activate India's historical involvement in Asian affairs.

Predictably, many Indians and Singaporeans alike dispute Lee's leading role that this book describes. An Indian high commissioner warned that I was 'in a minority of one' in crediting him with any part in the developing equation between the two countries. Another was even more dismissive. 'LKY will try and say he was always a friend of India. He will also suggest it was a case of tough love. Don't buy it!' The most scathing comments came from Singaporeans: 'LKY's a racist you know! You should write that,' said a colleague at the Nanyang Technological University where I taught in 2001–02. I assured him I would if he provided the evidence, but he had none beyond rumour and a stock of well-worn stories of dubious authenticity. All three—and others—insisted that the present exuberance between India and Singapore is entirely Goh's handiwork. The superficial evidence certainly appears to support this simplistic popular version. Goh lent credence to it by telling the Singapore–India Partnership Foundation in Calcutta in 2006 that he derived 'tremendous personal satisfaction' from being 'able to convert . . . sceptics'.<sup>6</sup> In proof, he quoted Lee's admission that 'he had given up on India long ago . . . [but] was happy to be proven wrong'.

This book cites evidence to explode that myth. The 'conversion' of which Goh spoke was no more than a return to the faith that had inspired Lee in the 1950s when Rajabali Jumabhoy, a prominent member of Singapore's Indian community, complained in the Legislative Assembly of which he was a member, that Lee 'constantly quotes India.'<sup>7</sup> So he did for, as he says, India and Indian nationalists were the only models he had as a young man fired by patriotic fervour. But as India floundered, his enthusiasm waned: 'The interesting part is I started off with high expectations. I tailed off, and now it's being revived, but in a more realistic appraisal of what is possible. I mean

no flights of fancy—because I know this is the system. This is the culture and in spite of all this slowness, India is going to make the grade. It can make the grade.<sup>8</sup>

The second fallacy the book destroys is that India was not interested in Asia until 1991. Chandrasekhar Dasgupta, India's high commissioner to Singapore in the early 1980s, argues it is a total misperception to imagine that everything was frozen until then.<sup>9</sup> India's historical commitment to Asia was emphasized soon after the First World War when the Indian National Congress spoke of an Asian federation.<sup>10</sup> Indians share the conviction of the then external affairs minister Pranab Mukherjee that 'Asia minus India is like *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark.'<sup>11</sup> Why nothing came of scores of ministerial visits, dozens of trade delegations and any number of industrial exhibitions, promotional campaigns, memoranda of understanding, feasibility studies, joint venture businesses, double taxation agreements, and technical assistance programmes, both bilateral and through the Colombo Plan, is another story. It is discussed in the succeeding pages.

The title, *Looking East to Look West*, also highlights a third point this book makes. In looking East and beyond, across the Pacific, Narasimha Rao's Look East policy brought back into focus a region that India had perforce neglected in recent centuries. His original target was the West. The West was the world. As Lee Hsien Loong knows, India's 'reforms started because the country had got into such dire straits that the IMF had to be called in. In those circumstances, with your feet to the fire, you had to do something decisive.'<sup>12</sup> Narasimha Rao's well-crafted response was to break out of the prison of self-sufficiency and move closer to countries with which India could establish substantial trading, investment and security links. That meant the United States and its partners. Singapore was the first stop on the road to America, a major break that came to be a destination in itself when India rediscovered Jawaharlal Nehru's realization that the world converged in Singapore.

Fourth, the book explains that in many respects India's relations with Singapore are an extension of her domestic governance. Lee the pragmatist recognized long ago that India would have to build up her strength before she could become a major player in the 'Concert

of Asia' and keep her 'Tryst with Destiny' in the new millennium. His prescription called for clean politics, secular egalitarianism, a unifying language that permits unhindered access to the storehouse of global knowledge, economic opportunities, and an honest, efficient and impartial administration. When he sounded most carping, it was because of the fear that an enfeebled India shackled by the Hindu rate of growth and wracked by caste and communal conflict could never match the grandeur of his dreams. When he appeared to eulogize China at India's expense, it was because of the fear that unless India became strong and powerful, China would steal a march to 'become the dominant power in Asia'.<sup>13</sup>

That leads to the fifth point. Lee has never wavered in his conviction that South-east Asia needs India to cope with China. In the 1960s he thought of a military partnership. Now, the focus has shifted to economic cooperation. Asean (the Association of South-east Asian Nations) alone cannot contend with China's growing might as one of the world's most significant trading and manufacturing powers. But Asean plus India commands impressive weightage. Like Manmohan Singh, however, Lee believes that Asian stability demands competition and cooperation, not confrontation, between the two giants; it calls for a trust-building process, the Indian leader's 'Asian Way', leading to an 'arc of advantage and prosperity across Asia' and 'an Asian economic community'.<sup>14</sup> Though Lee perceives that as Washington's strategy too, he adds a refinement: India and China must recreate the synthesis of the past.

Historically, these two great countries have influenced the economies, religions and cultures of South-east Asia. Hence the name Indo-Chinese peninsula and its mix of Indian and Chinese culture.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, the book discusses Lee's concept of Singapore's special responsibility for engaging India and bringing about a harmonious replication of the encounter with China that created one of the world's most enduring cultural fusions. He told Jaswant Singh—a courtly Rajput who was commissioned in the Indian army and served as India's defence, external affairs and finance minister before the Bharatiya Janata Party expelled him in August 2009 for not being sufficiently zealous in the cause of Hindu nationalism—that Singapore's survival depends on the equation between the two great

civilizations whose symbolic confluence lay in Laos's mysterious Plain of Jars.<sup>16</sup> Atal Behari Vajpayee paid tribute to Singapore's 'energetic espousal' of India's dialogue with Asean.<sup>17</sup> Manmohan Singh admits that India's 'engagement with South-east Asia owes a great deal' to Singapore's support.<sup>18</sup> Pranab Mukherjee too acknowledges that Singapore is 'a strong partner and an enthusiastic advocate of India' and that 'its political and corporate leadership have engaged Indians across a very broad spectrum of issues.'<sup>19</sup> Singapore has been called a 'Mother Hen' promoting India in Asian affairs.

Nehru was Lee's political inspiration. Nehru visualized Singapore as the hub of a new Concert of Asia in which a regenerated India would be a vigorous player. Visiting Singapore in 1946, he prophetically told members of the Ee Hoe Hean Club, comprising Chinese millionaires, 'Singapore can well become the place where Asian unity is forged, for in the future the peoples of Asia must hold together for their own good, and for the good and freedom of the world.'<sup>20</sup>

\*\*\*\*

This book describes in Lee's own words his fluctuating relationship with India—the journey from the sunlit peaks of hope into valleys of dark despair and, now, towards the radiance of a new dawn. Kamal Nath, now India's minister for road transport and highways, was a young man when he encountered Lee at the New Delhi Commonwealth summit in September 1983.<sup>21</sup> Having got to know him and Singapore since then, Nath sums up Lee's changing attitude: 'The difference between the acerbic and sharp speech from Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in his heyday [in 1983] and the fulsome confidence that this retired, wise statesman expresses for India today is the visible aspect of India's transition from its past to modern India.'<sup>22</sup>

Lee kept his Mission India to himself. He did not publicize the passionate interest that took him there year after year for three decades in search of economic space, political options and strategic support—pursuing and prodding the somnolent Indian giant to emerge from the ramparts of its South Asian bastion. Senior Singaporean officials were taken aback when I listed fourteen trips between 1959 and 2005. Even a minister who had to accompany him found the journeys as baffling as the Hindu god that keeps vigil outside his study in the Istana Negara Singapura—palace of the state of Singapore, the

president of Singapore's official residence, where Lee has his office. Hardly anyone knew that on his first visit to China in 1976, he snubbed Premier Hua Guo Feng by refusing to accept his gift of Neville Maxwell's controversial book, *India's China War*, which blames India for the 1962 Himalayan conflict. Lee thinks it a partisan account that tries to exonerate misguided belligerence.

The scanty literature on India–Singapore relations is severely academic and rarely ventures beyond economics or strategy. History and humanity play little part in these dissertations. The unsuspected vision that prompted Lee to seek invitations from successive Indian governments received even less attention. But Ong Keng Yong, a Singapore diplomat who witnessed the evolution of bilateral relations from the inside, put it in a nutshell, summing up the contributions that Lee and Goh made. The first chapter fleshes out his claim that 'the strategy was MM's. The stamina is SM's'. Ong also cites a perspicacious Westerner who drew a distinction between a 'racialist', someone who understands and appreciates ethnic differences, and a 'racist' who is driven only by prejudice.

Lee's geostrategic thinking was powerfully influenced by Kavalam Madhava Panikkar, the Indian historian and diplomatist who coined the term 'South-east Asia' for what had been known until then as Further India.<sup>23</sup> India was the first name that came to Lee's lips when he was asked about his infant republic's diplomatic relations on that historic day when he wrote to Shastri. He thought of India again the following year as soon as he learnt of Britain's planned force withdrawal from east of Suez, and flew to New Delhi to ask Indira Gandhi, who had succeeded Shastri, to become the new 'guardian' of South-east Asia.<sup>24</sup> As he confessed to the doyen of Indian industrialists, J.R.D. Tata, in a long recorded conversation on 18 May 1974 (but not published in Singapore until 1995), he had 'a selfish motive in wanting India to emerge as early as possible as a major economic power in world politics'.<sup>25</sup> If India did not 'emerge', Lee warned, Asia would be 'submerged'.<sup>26</sup> He based his case on Panikkar's thesis that 'the power which controls India can at all times control the East Indies' and must, therefore, play an active part in the ocean that bears her name.<sup>27</sup>

Indian officials and politicians confirm his regular refrain, 'Why is India holding back?' He grumbled about Indians living in a 'dream

world'. He criticized India's politicians for pampering vested interests in the name of socialism. He blamed Indian bureaucrats for serving themselves at the cost of the nation. He saw the decline of Air India, once one of the world's finest carriers, as symptomatic of the Indian state. He said everything that many Indians grumbled about, and more. He stayed away for years. But he did not ever abandon the idea of India. The myth of his aversion to India is really a distillation of the Singaporean bias that is neatly captured in *Raffles Place Ragtime*, a novel by Philip Jeyaretnam, a second-generation Singaporean of Ceylon Tamil descent. When Connie, a Chinese Singaporean girl trying to recover from an unhappy love affair, says she might 'travel round India', her friend Audrey, also of the same ethnicity, replies, 'So dirty. You'll catch hepatitis.' The tone of media coverage did not help. India was not part of Singapore's general discourse, as China was.

The most conclusive evidence against Lee, apart from his rather austere manner, is that so little happened bilaterally during his thirty-one years as prime minister. There is no denying that every substantive development started only after he selected Goh to carry on his work. Though Lee Hsien Loong modestly disclaims credit, the relationship gathered further momentum after he took over, prompting irreverent Singaporean jokes about 'the Father, the Son and the Holy Goh'. Two perceptive local politicians, Shunmugam Jayakumar and George Yong-Boon Yeo, who can themselves claim considerable credit for furthering ties, advance the most convincing explanation for the breakthrough not taking place earlier. As Mukherjee says in his Foreword, it was like Henri Cartier-Bresson's inspired photography: there had to be a 'decisive moment' for an exhilarating union of local and global circumstances.

The Cold War was the global factor that ruled out an earlier reconciliation of local interests. Jayakumar, lawyer, diplomatist and deputy prime minister, stresses that Lee's personal interest in India and familiarity with her leaders were not matched by a 'convergence of strategic or economic interest between India and either Singapore or Asean.'<sup>28</sup> In other words, Lee was a man before his time. There could be no meeting ground at the national political level so long as India and Singapore belonged to different international camps. Despite India's commitment to Asia as reflected in the two epochal



conferences in New Delhi that paved the road to Bandung, the Cold War forced her leaders to negotiate a delicate course between and with the superpowers. Only the concatenation of international events triggered by the end of the great global polarization made understanding possible. Lee's comparison of Indian recognition of Cambodia's Vietnam-backed Heng Samrin regime with Singapore's endorsement of the American invasion of Iraq acknowledges that both had to adjust to the superior force of international alignments.

As for local factors, George Yeo, who, like Lee, leavens politics with philosophy, identifies two equally significant reasons why the seed Lee sowed took so long to bear fruit. First, a 'fossilized' India saw no reason to undertake the domestic reforms without which there could be no meaningful relationship with a Singapore that rated economic vibrancy above all else. Second, India had to make the first move. 'If India turns inwards, we can wave, we can jump up and down, flash a light, but I don't think we'll receive much notice. It's only when India decides to look outwards, particularly when it looks eastwards, that Singapore comes into view.'<sup>29</sup>

India did that in July 1991 when Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh revolutionized national priorities. 'Let the world hear it loud and clear, India is now awake,' the finance minister proclaimed.<sup>30</sup> Lee heard, as he had heard Nehru's 'Tryst with Destiny' pledge forty-four years earlier, and was again enthralled. But he 'was already pretty elderly' he says, and 'didn't have the energy to go travelling'. 'So I said [to Goh] you chase it.'<sup>31</sup> Michael Leifer of the London School of Economics suggests that Goh also had personal reasons for responding to India's signal with his 1993 National Day Rally promise to spark 'a mild India fever'.

The partnership was still delayed because of a host of reasons. Despite her technical advance and huge market, India put off foreigners with what Lee calls her 'thicket of rules and regulations and bureaucracy'.<sup>32</sup> Mukherjee ('a very able fellow,' says Lee, 'I'm impressed with his intellect.')<sup>33</sup> has a psychological explanation. He says that centuries of foreign domination have left India with fear and suspicion of the rest of the world so that her quills bristle like a porcupine's when an outsider approaches.<sup>34</sup> While Indians conceived of international relations in terms of the brotherhood of man,

Singapore thought of foreign policy only as a business proposition. Lee's economic pragmatism clashed with India's socialist benevolence. His unabashed focus on wealth generation offended the Gandhian sense of virtuous poverty. Nehru's India firmly rejected notions of balance of power and spheres of influence that contradicted the idyllic vision of non-aligned brotherhood.

Moreover, the Asian role Lee outlined seemed unnecessary because, in her own estimation, India was always a world power. Indira Gandhi's favourite Peter Sellers line was a riposte from the comedy, *The Party*, where an Indian who is asked, 'Who do you think you are?' retorts, 'In India we don't think who we are, we know who we are.' India was so wrapped up in India, said John Gunther Dean, the German-born American ambassador, that foreigners were irrelevant. Singapore, groping in the Afro-Asian jungle, had little 'to bring to the table'.

\*\*\*\*

Lee was not the first Singaporean leader to look to India. That credit goes to the first chief minister, David Saul Marshall, a Baghdadi Jew with family connections in India, who was described at a symposium on the centenary of his birth as 'Singapore's first nationalist'. Marshall famously declared in the mid-1950s that he would place himself 'at the feet of Mr Nehru' before demanding self-government from the British. But Lee tried to give the relationship a depth and weight that was without international precedent. His intimate knowledge of India's history, culture, political and social institutions, and of individual players like Indira Gandhi's planning minister, Asoka Mehta, gave him the confidence to try to change the ideological constraints to which he himself had once paid lip service. This is, therefore, as much a book about multiracial Singapore and the enigma that is Lee Kuan Yew as about India's domestic developments in which Lee took a keen and informed interest. India, Singapore and Lee are details of the larger motif of an evolving Concert of Asia shaped by internal impulses and external pressures.

The combination of India's reluctance to become involved and China's 'unstoppable' (Lee's word) rise prompted him to think in terms of a multi-power solution for Asia's security problem in which India would play a crucial part. K. Kesavapany referred to that goal

in his Eminent Person's Lecture in New Delhi in March 2005 as the joint stake 'India and Singapore have in shaping the architecture of the new Asian regionalism'.<sup>35</sup> Even after helping India into Asean and the Asean Regional Forum, Singapore 'had to intervene', Lee says, to 'stop' China 'from hijacking the East Asia Summit' so that India was assured of her role there too.<sup>36</sup>

The mysterious bronze Nataraja, king of dance, outside Lee's door, is an apposite symbol of these complexities in a relationship that Yeo says is 'almost like a love affair'.<sup>37</sup> Even an old friend like Indian diplomat Thomas (Tom) Abraham assumed the image was another of those useless presents national leaders dump on each other. Few suspect that this depiction of Siva performing the *tandava nritya* or the Cosmic Dance of the Universe within a ring of fire has deliberately been placed there next to a boldly executed scroll by Zheng Bijian, friend and adviser of Hu Jintao and interpreter of China's 'peaceful rise'. Malacca-born Chingara Veetil Devan Nair, a trade unionist who became Singapore's third president and the first Indian in that position, bought the Nataraja when he lived in the Istana. In 1991, five years after Devan Nair's tempestuous exit, Lee had the figure moved to his anteroom.

Nataraja's religious significance cannot mean anything to an anglicized Chinese agnostic. Perhaps Lee likes the bronze just as a decorative piece. A Hindu deity amidst the Istana's Chinese scrolls and porcelain can also be a politically tactful gesture to the Indian element (8 per cent) in multiracial Singapore. It is especially meaningful to Tamils who dominate the Indian community (70 per cent) since this manifestation of Siva is identified with the tenth century Chola dynasty which emerged from Tamil Nadu's fertile Kaveri valley to leave a strong imprint on South-east Asia's life and culture. The Chola Nataraja is said to be the supreme statement of Hindu art.

Dare it be suggested that Lee's own achievement in fashioning a glittering modern metropolis out of a ramshackle colonial settlement without running water or electricity for most inhabitants, and where the people could only 'grow tapioca, make children and drink', may have looked like an earthly parallel of Siva's whirlwind dance to create the universe? 'We went through fire!' he says of the hazards the pioneers suffered. Nataraja's ring of flames could indicate just that.

A fifth possibility is that the image is a mute link with a man whose life and work were so closely connected with his but from whom he was rancorously estranged at the end. If so, it would suggest that the early associate who said there was not ‘an ounce of sentiment’ in Lee was mistaken. That was confirmed again in January 2008 by his whistle-stop trip to Jakarta to spend fifteen minutes at the dying Suharto’s bedside.

Singapore’s creator can be exasperatingly contrary, ‘the most puzzling politician’ Vernon Bartlett, the British socialist writer, had ever met.<sup>38</sup> When Lee denied being ‘emotional’ (‘I do not usually cry, or tear my hair . . . ’), he was obviously unaware of the number of times he has broken down and wept in public. It was especially ironic that he staked the claim vis-à-vis the utterly phlegmatic Nehru. Though Lee also declared more than once that independent Singapore would not need Gurkha troops, he could not forget their stoic march to prison in 1942. ‘As a result, the Singapore government has employed a Gurkha company for its anti-riot police squad from the 1960s to this day.’<sup>39</sup>

The world knows Lee as the champion of Asian values. But to Harold Wilson’s maverick foreign secretary, George Brown, Kuan Yew Lee, GCMG, CH (as an honorary knight he cannot use the ‘Sir’ prefix that other Grand Companions of the Most Distinguished Order of St. Michael and St. George can) was ‘the best bloody Englishman east of Suez.’<sup>40</sup> Singaporean critics sometimes rudely apply to him the American-Chinese slang of ‘banana’ (yellow outside, white inside) which has given rise to the ‘coconut’ (brown outside, white inside) jibe for Westernized Indians. Yet, this supposed Englishman manqué astounded Commonwealth leaders by declaring that only two battalions and five divisions of Vietcong-style guerrillas could put down Ian Smith’s white rebellion in Rhodesia, while India’s Swaran Singh and Malaysia’s Tengku Abdul Rahman were advocating talks with the rebels. Lee can criticize the United States as sharply as Indira Gandhi.

The ultimate paradox was the spectacle of a Chinese politician making overtures to China’s rival, an unabashed capitalist playing footsie with strident socialists, an American ally cosying up to the Soviet Union’s friends, a fervent democrat paying implicit tribute to

India's caste and class hierarchy. But, then, it would be idle to expect consistency from 'one of the few Confucian emperors to ever step down voluntarily.'<sup>41</sup> Tom Abraham quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do.'

\*\*\*\*

The story falls into three phases. The first reaches back into the mists of antiquity. As Lee and his son repeat, the Lion City's Sanskrit name is a permanent reminder of India's *mission civilisatrice*. Lee Hsien Loong elaborates: 'Historically India has had an enormous influence on South-east Asia; economically, and culturally too. The Ramayana story is present all over South-east Asia in different versions. The civilizations in the region were really Indian in origin—Sri Vijaya, even the Majapahit empires, and along the Malay peninsula and Singapore too.'<sup>42</sup>

The second phase began in 1819 when Stamford Raffles arrived in the appropriately named *Indiana*, and continued to the mid-1960s. Singapore was administered from Calcutta between 1819 and 1867. History in the guise of Pax Britannica reinforced the eternity that is *Suvarnabhumi*. Lee says 'the underlying ties were of an enduring nature . . . We read similar books and shared similar thought processes . . .'<sup>43</sup>

Colonial rule gave ethnic Indians an edge over the majority Chinese in this second phase. Though demographic reality took over, laws and banks, Godrej cupboards and Usha fans, manhole covers from Calcutta and schoolmasters from Madras or Kerala kept alive the common heritage. Ng Pock Too, a smart globetrotting businessman who was a member of Parliament (MP) from the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), Lee's political secretary and a key player in Tata's pioneering Singapore venture, speaks with affection of the Malayali 'Mr Vincent' who taught him mathematics. An elderly Chinese Singaporean told me he saw *Mother India* nine times in the *kampong* (the semi-rural settlements in which poorer Malays and Chinese lived) of his youth. Those links fell out of fashion. A PAP MP offered a partial explanation from Lin Yu-tang's *My Country*

*and My People*—‘Some people even regard the Moon as more beautiful if you look at it from the West.’<sup>44</sup> But fashion also has logic. India lost out by failing to keep pace with the global best. She and her products were identified with Singapore’s early poverty-stricken days. As India forges ahead again, her ties with prosperous Singapore, sitting astride the crossroads of Asian, indeed global, culture, as Nehru appreciated, are coming back to life.

Despite huge disparities of size, numbers and economic status, India and Singapore have much in common. Both are multiracial, multi-religious, multilingual secular democracies, members of the Commonwealth, non-aligned and G77 clubs. Singapore’s first foreign minister, Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, remarked after a meeting with his Indian counterpart, Dinesh Singh, that there were no bilateral issues to sort out.<sup>45</sup> Everything they ‘discussed related to other people’s problems in whose making we played no part.’ The downside of this ‘happy state of affairs’ was that there were no stakes either. Lee crusaded relentlessly to change that. In consequence, linkages range from Buddhism to banking, military to museums, terrorism control to technology transfer, investment to infrastructure, ports to piracy. Economic, strategic, social and cultural ties are developing so rapidly that no book can keep pace with them.

Common features and interests, and the absence of quarrels do not simplify the task of chronicling this third phase of a relationship that operates at many levels. Neither country is liberal about granting access to its archives. Because of the personal friendship between their leaders, many exchanges bypassed formal channels. Recollections can conflict and memory play tricks. One side’s version is not always the other’s. Even different people on the same side sometimes remember the same event differently. Inevitably, there are many grey areas, big and small, that lend themselves to conflicting interpretations—Singapore’s response to India’s Himalayan war; the Israeli connection; Asean’s American provenance; Air India’s role in setting up Singapore Airlines; or whether news of Pokhran I (India’s first nuclear explosion in 1974) broke in Lee’s office or the Mandarin Hotel, the list goes on. I have been given different versions of the meanings of even the defence and economic pacts that the two countries have signed.

Indians were baffled and disturbed by Goh's suspicions since Lee always described an Indian presence in South-east Asia as essential for the region's security and stability. A popular Indian fallacy is that India was the first country to recognize Singapore. Lee's conviction that China was Vajpayee's road to Damascus where he saw the light of liberalization is another puzzle. Lee's relationship with Indira Gandhi remains the ultimate enigma.

This book tries to steer through discrepancies and differences to recount how India and Singapore rediscovered each other in the endeavour to create a new Asia. Kunwar Natwar Singh's comment that India is pro-America because the children of eight out of ten Indian diplomats are studying or working in the United States is another way of repeating the famous claim by Thomas (Tip) O'Neill, speaker of the American House of Representatives, that all politics is local. So is all diplomacy. Singapore is fast becoming the new America for Indians, but with a difference. While only top-end professionals go to the United States, Indians from both extremes of the social spectrum can be found in Singapore. A later chapter describes how thousands of 'foreign workers' drawn by 'the scent of the S'pore dollar' as well as high-powered executives and consultants can in their different ways both strengthen and weaken the bond. Zheng Bijian's calligraphy in Lee's anteroom says it all: 'Raising one's head to view the vastness of the universe, lowering one's eyes to inspect the intricacies of things.'

\*\*\*\*

The genesis of this project lies in the old *Straits Times* office on Kim Seng Road where I worked for most of the 1990s. Rummaging in the library one lazy afternoon, I came upon a speech Lee had made in 1959, when Singapore still saw itself as an organic part of Malaya. Inaugurating an exhibition of Moghul and Rajput miniatures organized by India's representative, S.K. Banerjee, Lee compared India's imprint in South-east Asia with Greek and Roman influence in Europe.<sup>46</sup> He thought that India's cultural heritage was still 'glowing like a jewel in Malayan folklore, language, customs, court rituals, dances and music', and should inspire scholars to rewrite history 'not

in terms of Western empire builders, but from the standpoint of a Malayan nationalist'. It intrigued me that an ethnic Chinese born of immigrant stock, not a natural heir to the Suvarnabhumi tradition, should so ardently exalt a legacy that many South-east Asian leaders would rather forget. After meeting Nehru for the first time three years later, Lee paid enthusiastic tribute to India's 'machine age'—steel mills, giant hydroelectric projects and Five-Year Plans.

Compliments to India were so unusual in Singapore at that time, and local gossip so firmly branded Lee anti-Indian that my curiosity was aroused. I read many other speeches in the same vein that Lee had delivered all over the world, in Uppsala, Auckland and Lehigh universities, at the East-West Center in Honolulu, in London, Melbourne, Kuala Lumpur, New Delhi and, of course, Singapore. Apart from a reverence for Nehru, they expressed appreciation of India's ancient cultural roots, political stability, administrative efficiency and economic planning, as well as sympathetic understanding of the challenges India faced. Lee also paid Indian politicians compliments that sounded bizarre to an Indian ear. India was heir, for him, to an ancient civilization that continues to influence the contemporary world, even to the extent of explaining crucial differences between modern Malaysia and Indonesia. His expositions demonstrated a familiarity with India that no other foreigner can match. They also unfolded a vision of the future that draws sustenance from the past.

Some caveats must be entered. There are still problems of perception, more in Singapore than in India; and of indifference and suspicion, more in India than in Singapore. Lee Hsien Loong describes differences between India's central and state governments, between politicians and bureaucrats, between different arms of the same political party. In his view, West Bengal's chief minister, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, 'says the right thing, but in Delhi, the Marxist party doesn't sing the same tune.'<sup>47</sup> Any disruption of the liberalization process would diminish India's attractiveness for Singapore; rationalization of a bureaucracy that, as a Singaporean investor found, never misses a chance of saying 'No', would facilitate cooperation. Finally, India needs a settled neighbourhood to live up to Lee's expectations. The Concert of Asia of his dreams will lack balance and harmony if a China that has twice in twenty years felt



called upon to ‘teach’ a neighbouring country a lesson (to quote the imperious language of Chinese leaders) continues to see itself as more equal than others.

Assuming all goes well, two questions should be asked. First, where is the relationship heading? Second, what keeps it going? Some of the pioneers of India’s Information Technology industry who have set up global disaster recovery centres in Singapore feel the island could be to India what Hong Kong is to China. That is another way of repeating Badr-ud-din Tyabji’s proposal in 1954, when he was ambassador to Indonesia, that Indian diplomacy in South-east Asia should be managed from Singapore.<sup>48</sup> There is also Lee’s standing invitation to India to treat Singapore as the hub of her interests and activities in the region. Recalling the many proposals for novel forms of cooperation floated over the years, one can only speculate on some unique and as yet undefined multi-sided association that cannot be confined in the straitjacket of foreign relations. It may be pertinent to note in this context that Jaswant Singh, with his passion for antiquity, reminds us that India has never had a sense of territory. She has always been a nation but not a state. ‘You can’t find a single map of India before British times.’ Asia is for India a borderless world.<sup>49</sup>

As for the second question, it might well be asked, two prime ministers down the road in Singapore and five in India, whether Lee’s love affair still sustains the relationship. Or fuelled by mutual self-interest, has it acquired a momentum of its own? Something of both, I would say. Singapore’s substantial investments, whether of Temasek Holdings in ICICI Bank or CapitalLand’s in Pantaloon, are, as Lee stresses, a vote of confidence in booming India. No outsider can assess the octogenarian Lee’s reach within the government, but the evidence suggests that his vision still shapes official thinking. He attends every Cabinet meeting. In fact, the ground floor Cabinet room in the Istana, with its long board table, ranks of chairs and impassive Gurkha guard, provides the entrée to the lift that leads to Lee’s suite. No one can tell how long his influence will continue before mortality introduces a new order, but so far, Singapore has not deviated from his blueprint. One remembers in this context his warning in 1988 that anyone who imagined he would go ‘into permanent retirement

really should have their heads examined.’ The phenomenon of the Singaporean taxi driver whose garrulousness provides inquisitive foreigners with what sociologists call the ‘Other’ does not suggest that many people do. My wife and I were returning home late one night when the cabbie took the wrong exit. He promptly realized his mistake, braked, and backed out into the main road, saying, ‘It’s all right lah, Lee Kuan Yew sleeping now!’

Lee might have been unaware of that minor transgression but his two visits to India late in 2007 confirmed he definitely was not sleeping on a burgeoning relationship that seems likely to alter Asia’s strategic contours.