

**TRANSCRIPT OF PRIME MINISTER LEE HSIEN LOONG'S SPEECH
AT THE SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA CONVENTION ON 21 JULY 2011
AT RESORTS WORLD SENTOSA**

Ambassador Gopinath Pillai

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

I am delighted to be here with you this morning for the inaugural South Asia Diaspora Convention. I am glad we have a good turnout and an impressive line-up of speakers. This convention, I think, is a valuable platform to bring prominent members of the South Asian diaspora to Singapore to network with one another. It is an idea first mooted by President S R Nathan, as you have heard, and I would like to congratulate Institute of South Asian Studies for having successfully pulled it off and organised this conference.

There are about 50 million members in the South Asian diaspora. It is a very diverse group, comprising immigrants or descendants from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. They are spread all over the world and engaged in an enormous variety of industries. Many of them have done well in their adopted homes and on the international stage. Some have become celebrities, like Mr Lakshmi Mittal from India, a steel magnate and one of the top ten richest people in the world, or Mr Kemal Bokhary from Pakistan, who is now a prominent judge in the Hong Kong Court of Appeal. It reflects the quality and the talent that the diaspora contains and the contribution which they continue to make to their different societies and to the world.

The diaspora all over the world maintain two important connections. First, they build bridges between their adopted homes and their original homelands. So they open up new markets. For example, the early South Asian traders established vibrant trade links with Southeast Asia via the Malacca Straits and the Indian Ocean and today, the overseas diaspora are an important source of remittances to the homeland. Thus the Indian diaspora remitted US\$50 billion home to India in 2010, last year and the Pakistani diaspora remit perhaps US\$8 billion to Pakistan annually, very substantial sums.

The second link which the diasporas maintain and it is important to them is with their adopted communities, to build bridges with the local people, with the local societies in their adopted homes. It helps to disseminate new thinking to their adopted homes. For example, the early diaspora in Asia introduced new ideas of governance, leading to the establishment of Hindu kingdoms in Southeast Asia, Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms in Southeast Asia, like Srivijaya, like Funan, Chenla and Champa in Indochina. And they enrich the local cultures through informal interactions, sharing cultural festivities, customs, habits and so on.

It is important to complement and balance these two roles because if the diaspora focuses only on its links with their homeland, it may not be welcome by the local communities. On the other hand, if it becomes too localised, then it risks losing touch of its original culture and heritage and being de-culturalised and diminishing its value added. So either would compromise the diaspora's effectiveness as a link between their original homelands and their adopted homes.

Singapore welcomes members of the South Asian diaspora. We are a very open society. We have welcomed people not just from South Asia, but also from Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia and, indeed, from around the world. There are many historical links between Singapore and South Asia. Even our name, 'Singapura', has Sanskrit roots. We have longstanding trade ties with the Subcontinent and religion, for example, Islam, came through Indian traders to Southeast Asia.

The first wave of the South Asian diaspora formed a significant minority in Singapore's population. They came to Singapore in the 19th and early 20th centuries. They settled down here, started families here, became part of our community and they have made many significant contributions to Singapore. For example, Mr Rajabali Jumabhoy, who was a successful merchant, who founded the Indian Chamber of Commerce in 1935, or Mr S Rajaratnam and Mr Devan Nair, both pioneering leaders of Singapore from our founding generation. One went on to be Deputy Prime Minister, the other one went on to be President.

In these last ten to 15 years, there has been a new wave of a South Asian diaspora which has come to Singapore. Many have come to do business, some have made this their home and I am confident that in time, the new arrivals, many of them, will also integrate into Singapore society, both with the Singaporean Indians, those who had come a couple of generations earlier, and also with other ethnic groups and they will contribute much to Singapore and ultimately, strengthen our society and enhance our cultural diversity.

I would like to encourage the South Asian diaspora to continue the partnership with Singapore and with the rest of Asia. We are well-positioned here in Singapore to be a springboard for the South Asian diaspora to engage the rest of Asia and the world because we are located at the crossroads of trade, talent and capital flows, because we are business-friendly with a good legal system, with a transparent business environment and with a prevalent use of English throughout our society as a working language. We are also attractive to families as a safe place to live where you can get good schools and healthcare and not too far from the home of origin and perhaps family back home, and this is a natural hub for companies and talent to connect with one another. At the same time, Singapore knows Northeast Asia well. We have a majority Chinese population, or at least Chinese-descent population, and a cultural affinity and common language gives us a deeper understanding and better access to the Chinese market.

With South Asia, we have good connections, geographically close and many Singaporeans of South Asian origin maintain family ties with their ancestral countries and can serve as facilitators in Singapore and quite a number of the Singaporean

children of the diaspora regularly return to their ancestral homes for, among other reasons, to brush up on their ancestral tongues, like Tamil, Hindi, Malayalam, Urdu, Sinhalese or Punjabi. And it helps the diaspora to retain their ties through languages, customs and practices.

So we will actively foster links with South Asia. With India, we signed a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement, which was a landmark deal back in 2005. Since then, our bilateral trade has boomed, last year exceeding S\$30 billion and we have become the second biggest foreign investor in India. The ASEAN group also has an FTA with India and as India prospers and our ties deepen, I am quite sure that bilateral and regional trade will go up. With other South Asia countries, there is great potential for the relationship to grow and I hope that as the countries stabilise and open up and prosper, we will similarly develop and strengthen our links and our cooperation with them.

Singapore continues to enrich our understanding of South Asia. Therefore, we set up the Institute of South Asian Studies to focus on South Asian culture and heritage and ISAS, headed by Mr Pillay, established the South Asian Link website and a newsletter to track global activities in the South Asian diaspora. And this convention and similar activities are useful. With the theme of 'Linking the South Asian Diaspora', I hope it will seed new ideas and build lasting links amongst you.

The diaspora story is one of courage, tenacity and creativity. Many years ago, our South Asian forefathers of that generation forged new lives overseas in Singapore and other parts of the region. Today, their children and grandchildren are connecting back to their countries of origins and linking beyond to the wide world. They are creating their own stories, remaining proud of their heritage but striving for a common shared future. And Singapore is proud to be part of this because we succeeded largely on the backs of our diaspora, the Indian one, the Chinese one, one from Southeast Asia, people who have come from many lands to create a home and a nation on this island, and we hope from this base, we will continue to be the bridge that links Asia and the world together. Thank you very much.

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