

REVISITING SINGAPORE

Bibekananda Ray

IN FOUR YEARS AFTER MY last brief visit in 2003, Singapore has changed a great deal. Many new shopping malls, high-rise buildings, flyovers and a third metro (locally known as Singapore Mass Rapid Transport, or SMRT) rail-line have come up. The fourth, a Downtown Line, has been planned and will be ready in 2018, which will connect more areas in the north of this rhombus-shaped island, at a cost of 12 billion Singapore dollars (henceforth S\$), i.e. about 35000 crore rupees. The third terminal of Changi airport, the world's best since 1988, built at a cost of S\$ 1.75 billion, i.e., about 4900 crore rupees, will be opened to air traffic in January, this year the three together will then handle 70 million passengers a year and take Changi airport ahead of Hong Kong's Chek Lap Kok. A third university, Singapore University of Management, has since come up in addition to the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University, which have been functioning for years. A multi-storey dazzling shopping mall, Vivo City overlooking the Singapore harbour and Sentosa Island is another attraction, these days.

UPSWING AGAIN

When I first arrived in Singapore in February 1996 to work for All India Radio, its so-called 'tiger economy' recorded, that year, its highest ever growth, over 10%. Within two years, it nose-dived to zero growth and under, following devaluation of Thai baht, raising hue and cry in the governments and the people. Only twice before, in 1963- when it became a Malay Federation province and 1985 owing to world recession- its economy had negative growth. To survive the 1998-2001 crisis, Singapore's own and foreign companies took to massive lay-offs, closure and flight of capital. Job-lost Singaporeans took to tuition, driving taxis, hawking food and doing sundry menial jobs to survive. Guided by Prime Minister Goh, Lee Kuan Yew, then Senior Minister and his son, Lee Hsien Loong (then Deputy Premier, now Prime Minister), it steered out of the crisis in three years. In 2002, the economy began to turn round and in just five years since, its GDP is growing at over seven percent, this year. The Global City, as its first Foreign Minister, S Rajaratnam, envisaged it to be, may even soar to the level of its pre-1998 'miracle economy', as the World Bank termed it. The government-controlled media-four main newspapers, namely, *The Straits Times*, *Business Times*, *Lianhe Zaobao* (Chinese), *Berita Harian* (Malay) and *Tamil Murasu* (Tamil), half a dozen tabloids and a TV channel NEWS ASIA—are again buzzing with news of corporate successes, capital market gains and full and multi-page advertisements for flats, condominiums, cars, mobile phones, electronic goods and sundry creature comforts—from cosmetics to cucumbers. The two-month long Great Singapore Sale, from 23rd May to 22nd July, is luring hordes of home and tourist buyers "to shop till you drop", as the cliché goes, availing special discounts. The fabled Sentosa Fun Island and the Night Safari (zoo) are also drawing hundreds of tourists and residents, every evening. An exclusive bird park in Jurong also draws a large number of tourists at the midday feeding time.

Currently, a buying spree has rendered Singapore's bourses bullish. On 18th June'07, Singapore's STI index soared above 3600 points, a record. The private job market is also warming up with carrots of higher pay and perks, luring youngsters to better their pay and perks. Only less than four in a hundred in a resident population of 5.67 million are without jobs. Youngsters return home, standing in night trains and buses from extra part-time jobs, or courses, which would land them on better jobs. The people's average income, last year, stood at 30,000 US dollars, i.e., nearly 14 lakh rupees in a year.

Singapore's economy is mainly business-driven; it has some nominal farmland, growing maize, a few dairy, poultry and goat-farms. Even the so-called Singapore banana that sells in India is no longer grown. Milk, vegetables, poultry ('chicken rice' is the favourite of the Chinese), eggs, liquor (except its fabled 'Gin Sling' and Tiger beer)—in fact, nearly all items of daily consumption—are imported. It also buys some electricity and a part of its daily requirement of 1.25 million cubic cusecs of water from Malaysia.

Modern Singapore is a wholly government-made country. Assets, belonging to foreigners alone, are worth about S\$ 300 billion to S\$ 500 billion. In economic competitiveness, this tiny republic now ranks second to the USA, displacing Hong Kong. This year's World Competitiveness Year Book commends it as 'the easiest place' to secure venture capital; it's also close to the USA in wealth management. In a 'quality-of-life' survey, published in June, Singapore was adjudged the 17th most liveable city in the world (No Indian city figured among 20 best) for its good connectivity with other world cities by air, good communication network, low crime rate, racial harmony and affordability. Although near Sumatra, it has never been hit by a severe earthquake which could have razed down its hordes of skyscrapers.

LEE KUAN YEW

No account of Singapore is complete without a look at its most revered founder, Lee Kuan Yew, as long as he is alive. Modern Singapore is very much his creation, a dream coming true, as it were. His three-volume memoirs, 'The Singapore Story' tell of his passion and pains to transform a tiny backward British colony into a World City and take it from the Third World to the First. 'Non-stop learning' of the decision-making processes by Western companies and their governments helped him and his cabinet colleagues fine-tune policies to attract them for investment. These days, he comments often on global issues, particularly on China and India, both of which, he thinks, will overtake Japan and Singapore in 15 to 20 years. Born in a wealthy expatriate Chinese family in 1923, he qualified for the bar in 1950 and returning to Singapore, the same year, began practice the local courts. Anti-British agitations made him launch the People's Action Party (PAP) with 15 like-minded friends on 21st November 1954. After the PAP won the election to the Legislative Assembly, he became Singapore's first Prime Minister on 5th June 1959. Five years after Singapore became independent from Britain on 31st August 1963, when the first General Election was held in 1968, his party swept it. There was no looking back for him and his party which has ruled Singapore for over 47 years at a stretch and is still in saddle. Virtually expelled from the Malay Federation on 9th August 1963, Lee built up Singapore from the scratches and made it a 'miracle economy' in just 30 years Singapore's

overseas trade and commerce with the region received a boost after it became a member of the Association of South East Asian Nations, ASEAN, which Lee and heads of four other countries launched on 8th August 1967. He stepped down from office at the age of 67, in 1990 but remained an adviser to the government as a Senior Minister from that year and as Minister Mentor from 2004 when his son was elected Prime Minister and PM Goh became the Senior Minister. At this age (84), he travels abroad to attract investors in Singapore, to advise foreign governments, to speak to the media and write on world issues. He has become like the Biblical 'Wise Man of the East'.

CURBING COMMUNISM

Initially, the PAP had a communist wing, comprising members of the Communist Party of Malay (CCPM). Mr Lee had a Marxist leaning in England and even in the early years of the PAP but was disenchanted when communists triggered a series of riots between the Chinese and the Malays, eroding Singapore's stability and security until the 1980s. Like General Suharto in Indonesia, he never let Marxists rise and even banished a communist MP, Chia Thye Poh, representing a former PAP faction, Barisan Sosialis, to Sentosa Island in 1989, where he was confined till 27th November 2005. Many other communists were subsequently detained under the notorious Internal Security Act (ISA), without trial, in 1987-'88, raising heated controversy.

SISYPHEAN OPPOSITION

There is but one slur on the susurrus of global praise for the PAP government; it is unfair treatment of the opposition. It has been immune to anti-incumbency syndromes which make even the best of governments fall. In 2006 election, it conceded only three seats to the opposition in a House of 83. No Singaporean discusses politics outside home; so afraid they are of political reprisal- The opposition parties and leaders seldom figure in the media. In no other country perhaps, defamation suits by the ruling party leaders against outspoken opposition politicians are so common and fetch so much money in damages. The PAP government uses six prohibitory laws to stifle opposition publicity. Notable non-politicians to be sued was an American professor in the National University, also sacked and extradited, in 1990 for 'defaming' elder Lee in an article in a Hong Kong newspaper that as per Asia's dynastic tradition, his son, Lee Hsien Lung would succeed him. A British neurologist professor was sacked in 2003 from a government institute for alleged ethical and professional breaches. He recently wrote in *The Lancet* that "the rejection of the Western liberal emphasis on individual freedom is a well-known tenet of Singapore's society".

When the PAP first formed the government, winning a Legislative Assembly election, in 1959, there were two other parties—the Labour Front, led by David Marshall and the Workers' Party, founded by a Chinese communist, David Low in 1957. After Low, a Sri Lankan expatriate and a lawyer, J B Jeyaretnam nurtured the party and was elected to Parliament in a by-election in 1982 after five unsuccessful attempts. Reverses did not daunt him, as his party contested and lost in all the ten general elections until in 2001 he lost his parliamentary seat and was jailed, following a Singapore court declaring him bankrupt, as he could not pay damages in several libel suits, totalling about S\$ 600 thousand, i.e., about 168 lakh rupees. On an appeal, early this year, he was offered 'conditional

discharge' if he paid 5% of the total damages, about S\$ 233256 (over 65 lakh rupees) by mid-May, this year, which government leaders who sued him, accepted. His two sons and others managed the money and he was discharged from jail on 10th May. Altogether, he was made to pay some two million Singapore dollars, i.e., nearly 5.4- crore rupees, as damages in libel suits. Often called, 'the lion of Singapore politics', Mr Jeyaretnam, now 81, has announced launching a new outfit, Reforms Party whose fete may not be very different from the Workers' Party, he headed for long. Two years older, Lee Kuan Yew is determined to ruin him : "As long as Jeyaretnam stands for what he stands for, a thoroughly destructive force we will knock him down", Lee once remarked.

Although there are now about 20 of them, no opposition party or alliance could field candidates in all the constituencies in 12 general elections. They lack unity, 'organic links to the society', grassroots organisation, favourable media and bureaucracy, trade unions and pressure groups like NGOs. Other notable opposition leaders are Chiam See Tong of the People's Party, Dr Chee Soon Juan of the Democratic Party, Low Thia Kiang and Sylvia Lim of the Workers' Party and Sebastian Teo of National Solidarity Party. Dr (Professor) Chee was sacked from the National University for petty misuse of office stationery, bankrupted for libels and jailed. These four parties formed the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) and contested 2006 General election but fared badly. Singapore's opposition is like the Greek mythological sinner, Sisyphus who rolled up a boulder to a hilltop from where it rolled down.

'ILLIBERAL' REGIME

Western writers label Singapore as an 'illiberal democracy' and 'softly authoritarian'. Privately, many Singaporeans are disgusted with lack of political freedom and openness. In May this year, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, which hosted a conference on transparency & governance, Kishore Mahbubani remarked: "Singapore, paradoxically, is one of the most open societies in the world and in some ways, one of the least open; it has real secrets to worry about", e.g., political funding, disclosure of politicians' assets, openness and competitiveness of political participation and an independent media. Lee Kuan Yew believes, Singapore will decline if the opposition wrests power. The younger generation is demanding a greater say in national decision-making but Mr Lee is adamant in his belief that the Western-type of democracy would derail Singapore from its path of growth. He and his PAP followers believe, "there is no place in Singapore society for the intellectual who separates ideas from action, who only wants the freedom to point out what is not right, not to how to put things right", as one of its founders, S Rajaratnam said. □□□