

Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Conference, Singapore, 10 October 2008
Address by H. E. Mr S R Nathan, President, Singapore

Prime Minister Ramgoolam and Mrs Ramgoolam
Honourable Ministers
Excellencies
Distinguished Guests

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to Singapore. We are honoured to host the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas for the first time in Singapore.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru once wrote, "I have become a queer mixture of the East and West. Out of place everywhere, at home nowhere." That statement probably reflects the sentiment of many among the Indian Diaspora.

The Pravasi Bharatiya Divas is an idea that has different meanings for different people. For some it is something of a homecoming, a gathering of friends and families separated by distance but joined in a common spirit. For others, it is a cultural odyssey, an opportunity to go in search of their ancestral roots. Since its inception in 2003 it has expanded in scope and scale, bringing together people from all over the world in a dialogue with the emerging giant that is India, to foster better understanding as well as explore economic opportunities. The diverse mix of guests here tonight – from Australia through the Gulf States to Germany, from US through East Asia and Australia to Mauritius – is a resounding testament to the success of that idea.

In one sense, it is somewhat fitting that this unique occasion is being held here. Singapore, located at the heart of major sea routes spanning the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, has long been a crossroads for human traffic since its founding in 1819. Under the British, immigration was encouraged to build up the fledgling colony's population. Migrants poured into Singapore, with the bulk of them from south-eastern China, followed by the Malay Archipelago and India.

Many of these migrants thought that their stay in Singapore was only going to be a temporary sojourn. It was no different for early Indian migrants who came to Singapore, many of whom remained deeply attached to their motherland.

Indeed, one of the things that was unique about the Indian community in Singapore for many was its transient nature. As Nehru described it; "India clings to me, as she does to all her children, in innumerable ways." So it was for these migrants. They were a diverse lot, originating from Tamil Nadu to Bengal to Kerala, and comprising Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Jains and Parsees. They came as traders, as soldiers and as the labourers who worked the plantations and built the growing city. But they kept their cultures and their links with India, never losing sight of it, and eventually some of them returned home after staying for a few years.

But there were many that stayed, and gradually a permanent Indian community took root, a development helped along by the creation of independent Singapore in 1965 and our nation-building efforts. Today, that community forms slightly less than 9 percent of Singapore's population, but this belies the disproportionate influence that it has had on the development of independent Singapore and earlier over the past two centuries. The lives of well-known Indians echo loudly from our history books. Narayana Pillai, supposedly the first Indian civilian to set foot in Singapore, was a prominent builder and founded Singapore's first Hindu temple, which still stands today. Dr N Veerasamy was a leading doctor and community leader in the early 1900s. S Rajaratnam was a founder of the People's Action Party and one of Singapore's most outstanding statesmen and author of the pledge that Singaporeans, young and old, rededicate themselves to.

Whether it is in politics, the legal profession, the civil service or in business, Indians have played major roles in making Singapore what it is today. And we have not seen the tide of the Indian Diaspora ebb yet – far from it. Even today, Singapore is becoming home to a new wave of immigrants from India, one that is just as diverse and better equipped than those who landed on our shores nearly two centuries ago. It is a trend that is reshaping the community and the wider nation in unpredictable and profound ways.

But as many of the speakers at this conference have noted, the Indian Diaspora plays a role in shaping not just the host country, but the mother country as well. Pandit Nehru wrote in "The Discovery of India" that "So long as India kept her mind open and gave of her riches to others, and received from them what she lacked, she remained fresh and strong and vital. And the more she withdrew into her shell, intent on preserving herself, uncontaminated by external influences, the more she lost that inspiration, and her life became increasingly ... centered in the dead past." In this context, the Diaspora, when properly engaged, does not merely confer economic advantage. It also brings with it an infusion of ideas and cultures that have been creatively synergised with its hosts. This is a process which I believe will keep India invigorated as well as shape the mental landscape underpinning the idea of Indianness itself. The discovery of India, it would seem, unfolds both within India and without as well.

I hope that the Conference afforded each of you many opportunities to interact with the wide number of participants from different parts of the world. I also hope that you will take away with you both fond memories of Singapore and the Conference and lasting friendships. Thank you.

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