



Lee Kuan Yew: Asia's 'Singaputra'

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Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of modern Singapore and its first Prime Minister, took his last breath at the Singapore General Hospital on March 23, 2015. Aged 91, he passed away after more than a month of hospitalisation (since February 5, 2015) due to pneumonia. Lee was born in 1923 in a baba family in Colonial Singapore. It may be mentioned that babas are a community of English/Malay speaking ethnic Chinese based in the Straits Settlements: Malacca, Penang and Singapore, which were part of the Colonial British Empire.

Lee Kuan Yew, an alumnus of Cambridge University, is rightfully given the credit of being the father of Singapore as it was under his decisive leadership that Singapore transformed itself from a gloomy third world port to the hub of Asian maritime commerce and economic activity. For instance, when Lee assumed the Prime Minister's office in 1959, the annual per capita Gross Domestic Production (GDP) of Singapore was US\$ 400, and when he stepped down in 1990, it had crossed the US\$ 12,000 mark. Such was the strength of the Singaporean economy that it defied the speculations during the Asian Financial Crisis, and the per capita GDP reached a new benchmark of US\$ 22,000 in 1999.

The People's Action Party (PAP), which he formed in 1954, turned out to be the principal actor in the Singaporean political system, being the predominant political party of Singapore. After taking over as the Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee did his best to ensure that an independent Singapore stands on its feet rather than being excessively dependent on Malaysia, especially in the trade and commerce domain. He, thus, built Singapore as the manufacturing powerhouse of modern Asia.

Lee had inherited a poor Singapore infested by the problems of pitiable infrastructure and housing facilities. His conviction to change Singapore into a modern City State is also evident from his decision to set up in 1960 the Singapore's Housing and Development Board to replace slums with modern housing facilities. His attempts were remarkably successful as today more than three-fourth Singaporeans reside in the government housing.

Likewise, his idea to build the Development Bank of Singapore (DBS) in 1968 turned out to be a great success. Today, the DBS Group Holdings Limited is the biggest bank in the Southeast Asian region.

Lee Kuan Yew, also referred to as Harry, successfully implemented his own model of governance, termed as 'pragmatic authoritarianism'. Away from the baggage of ideological predispositions, he not only drove Singapore towards impeccable growth and evolution into a multi-cultural society, but was also the inspiration behind the Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping's policy of 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics'.

From the day Singapore achieved independence to the year 2015, when the 'Lion City' is celebrating its 50th anniversary, Lee remained at the heart of the Singaporean politics. The founding member of the PAP, Lee, as Prime Minister, was instrumental in ensuring Singapore's ascendance to growth and prosperity; as Senior Minister, Mr. Lee strengthened the multi-cultural ethos of the country and; as Minister Mentor, he tried to inject new thrust to the rise of Asia and the Asian powers. As a matter of fact, since he took

over on June 3, 1959, Lee remained Singapore's Prime Minister for twenty-five years before taking up the responsibilities of Senior Minister and Minister Mentor that continued till 2011. The Financial Express aptly describes his contribution stating, "Lee Kuan Yew formalised the Singaporean model of a paternalistic and softly authoritarian single-party state, which, in its ethos, remains liberal."

He is often critiqued by the western liberals of tightening the state control to the extent of stifling democracy. Nevertheless, he deserves to be appreciated for bringing the state back in the economy, for much of the liberal discourse pleads for the non-intervention of the state in economic matters.

Condoling the death of Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated on twitter that Lee Kuan Yew was "A far-sighted statesman and a lion among leaders, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew's life teaches a valuable lesson to everyone..." While Lee could not gather Indian support in building up Singapore's military capability during the Nehru era, he remained one of the staunchest supporters of India throughout his life. Over the years, India-Singapore relations have grown to such an extent that the latter has arguably become 'India's strongest partner in Asia'. Sensing Lee's willingness to work closely with India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is likely to attend his funeral to pay India's last respects to 'Asia's Singaporean son'.

Often termed as the shrewdest politician of the Asian region, Lee invented a blend of multi-cultural and meritocratic society; a soft mixture of democratic freedom and authoritarianism, thus addressing the concerns of common Singaporeans as well. In the foreign policy domain, he successfully showed the world that it is possible to strike a balance in terms of relations with the two superpowers, China and the US, and benefit from them.

In summation, one may reiterate what Ms. Margaret Thatcher, former Prime Minister of UK, in her book *Statecraft: Strategies for a Changing World*, had pointed out, "Mr. Lee almost single-handedly built Singapore into one of the most astonishing economic

success stories of our times, and he did so in the face of constant threats to his tiny state's security and indeed existence." Lee Kuan Yew was not only instrumental in ensuring impeccable growth and sustainable development of Singapore, but also made Singapore one of the four Asian tigers. The inspiration of several Asian leaders, he will always be remembered as one of the finest Asian Statesmen and a nation-builder who transformed Singapore from a Third World country to a member of the First world.

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