Let's have Indian and Singapore students take part in joint hackathon: Modi to PM Lee

SINGAPORE - Visiting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi suggested on Friday (June 1) to his Singapore counterpart, Mr Lee Hsien Loong, that students from the two countries should participate in a hackathon, with each side providing a set of questions the other would try to solve.
Disclosing this, Education Minister Ong Ye Kung said he was in favour of the idea.

"Chances are they can come up with cheap, efficient and effective solutions. It's a great idea, and I think we should gather our universities and do this," Mr Ong said.

He was introducing Mr Modi at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), where the Indian leader was taking part in a dialogue with NTU president Subra Suresh on 'Transforming Asia Through Innovation'.

Mr Modi said the main challenges facing Asia were common.

These include skills for the digital age, creating jobs in the age of digital reception, agricultural productivity, water, pollution, and rapid and mass urbanisation.

"These challenges require collaboration among governments, universities and laboratories," said Mr Modi.

"Policy interventions are important. A lot of finance would be needed, given the scale and magnitude. We need innovation and technology to address these challenges. These should be the priorities for our governments," he added.

He recalled his informal meeting last month with China's President Xi Jinping, whom he presented with the findings of an American university that said in the past 2,000 years, China and India had accounted for 50 per cent of the global GDP during 1,600 of them.

"That in itself is a very strong and a very powerful message. Without any conflicts, and if we can overcome our internal problems... we can transform that into opportunities in the service of humanity - for peace and for harmony - then we together can make a huge contribution," he said.

Mr Modi said that space technologies can make immense contributions to mankind, giving an example from the time he was Chief Minister of the Indian state of Gujarat.

He said he helped fishermen increase their catch by using satellite technology to provide them with the latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates of the best areas for fishing via mobile phone. This increased their incomes.

"As you know in democracies, there are political pressures, and that is very difficult to handle. But technology gives you the strength to handle that," he added, referring to attempts by politicians to have infrastructure built in their constituencies.

"It also helps you in decision-making," Mr Modi said, adding that the construction of roads, hospitals or schools becomes very easy with the use of satellite imaging and technology.
Asked about the conflict between tradition and modernisation, Mr Modi said if “innovation and technology are combined with human values, then in the service of humanity, the kind of force multiplier that it has cannot be imagined.”

Mr Modi also countered the perception that disruption meant destruction, saying without disruption, there could be no progress.

Citing computers, he noted that when they were introduced, many lamented they would put people out of jobs.

“But computers have given rise to an entire world of jobs. So each innovation definitely brings in some disruption. But then a new reality comes into being,” he added.

Mr Modi also described technology as an empowering tool, noting that both the poor and wealthy now had mobile phones.

He noted that technology “is supposed to empower. It’s only then we can have inclusive growth. We need to open our doors to technology, to innovation.”

Asked how he maintains his stamina and optimism amid a hectic schedule, while still finding the time to tweet and use Facebook, Mr Modi said he had never taken a vacation since 2001 because he had seen how ordinary people toiled on a daily basis.

He also had some advice for the 2,400-strong audience of mainly diplomats, educators and students.

"To keep on working, one has to keep oneself very fit - fit in body, but also fit in mind and soul," he said, noting that with no distractions like vices, "you can only progress and go forward."

During the NTU event, Mr Modi and Mr Ong witnessed the exchange of several agreements, memoranda of understanding and statements of intent, including a commitment from Indian tech billionaire Senapathy Gopalakrishnan to donate $4 million to NTU.

The money will be used for two NTU postdoctoral fellowships as well as joint PhDs between NTU and the Indian Institutes of Technology in Chennai and Mumbai, and a joint supervision and research programme with the Indian Institute of Science in Bengaluru.

NTU has also entered a pact for a research and exchange partnership with the National Institution of Transforming India (NITI Aayog), as well as an agreement to collaborate with the Indian Institute of Space and Technology on research and education.