Modi moots idea of student hackathon

Indian Prime Minister holds dialogue at NTU on transforming Asia through innovation

Arvind Jayaram

Visiting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi suggested to his Singapore counterpart, Mr Lee Hsien Loong, during a meeting yesterday that students from the two countries should participate in a hackathon, with each side providing a set of questions that 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 is a great idea, and I think we should gather our universities and do this,” he said.

Mr Ong made these remarks when he was introducing Mr Modi, who was taking part in a dialogue at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) yesterday with its president Subra Suresh on “Transforming Asia Through Innovation”.

During the dialogue, Mr Modi said the main challenges facing Asia were common, listing, among other things, skills for the digital age, creating jobs in the age of digital reception, agricultural productivity, water, pollution and mass urbanisation.

“These challenges require collaboration among governments, universities and laboratories,” he said.

“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,” the Indian leader said.

He recalled his informal meeting last month with Chinese President Xi Jinping, to whom he presented the findings of an American university which said that China and India accounted for 50 per cent of the global gross domestic product during 1,600 of the past 2,000 years.

“I think 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,” he said.

Asked about the conflict between tradition and modernisation, Mr Modi said that if “innovation and technology are combined with human values... the kind of force multiplier that it has cannot be imagined”.

He also countered the perception that disruption meant destruction, asserting that without disruption, there could be no progress.

Asked how he maintains his stamina and optimism, while still finding the time to tweet and use Facebook, Mr Modi pointed out that he had not taken a vacation since 2001 because he had seen how ordinary people toiled on a daily basis.

Mr Modi and Mr Ong yesterday witnessed the exchange of several agreements, memoranda of understanding and statements of intent with NTU at the event, including a donation of $4 million by Indian tech billionaire Nandan Nilekani’s Kairos to the university.

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 reached a pact for a research and exchange partnership with the National Institution of Transforming India, or NITI Aayog, as well as an agreement to collaborate with the Indian Institute of Space and Technology on research and education.

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