Catching 'India fever'

More Singaporeans are flocking to a booming India for work and university internships

Teo Cheng Wee

Three years ago, when senior executive Johnnie Tng was headhunted by a recruitment agency for a high-level job in India, he turned it down.

Concerned about housing, food and schooling issues for his three young children, he did not even look at the terms.

But the agency persisted. After checking with a friend who was already working there, Mr Tng, 40, decided he, too, would catch the "India fever".

"I missed the China boat. I didn't want to miss the India one as well," said Mr Tng, who is an active Singaporean. He readily agreed to move when the Economic Development Board posted him to Mumbai as its regional director in 2004.

Internships in India also made up more than one-third of all overseas internships at SMU last year.

At the National University of Singapore's (NUS) business school, the number of students who took up an internship in India this year has risen 50 per cent from last year.

Similarly, the number of Nanyang Technological University (NTU) students who did an internship in India has doubled. Both NUS and NTU declined to give exact figures.

For NTU engineering undergrad Kenneth Quah, 23, he feels his six-month internship in India, which started in January, will "broaden my cultural and global knowledge, an asset in today's global economy".

This growing passage of Singaporeans to India is not entirely surprising, given that Singapore was the country's second largest investor last year, with a foreign direct investment of about US$1.45 billion ($1.7 billion) – more than double that of 2006.

It still lags behind China, but given that India opened up only in the mid-1990s, it will take five to 10 years to catch up, said Mr Menon. "India may still be regarded as a 'hardship posting' in that its cities are not as well-developed as China's, but it's a joy working with its smart and articulate people, and tackling the challenges that come along the way."

Mr Richard Tan, 38, who works in Mumbai as a regional director for the Economic Development Board, is a real estate developer that rose to prominence in the 1970s.

On personal space

"Cutting queues is common, so I found that Indians like to leave no gap between them and the person in front. So don't take offence if you find someone standing very, very close to you in a line."

On dining out

"Food is a big issue. Restaurants are either very cheap local restaurants or very luxurious ones in five-star hotels. There are very little in between, so we often burn a hole in our pockets eating in the expensive ones."

Mr Richard Tan, 38, who works in Mumbai as a regional director for the Economic Development Board.

He had to stock up on candles because when he first moved in, there were about five blackouts a day, each lasting half to one hour. It is better now – just one a day.

Mr Reginald Wee, International Enterprise Singapore's regional director (South Asia), who moved his family of five to Mumbai last June, misses decent Chinese food.

"There are only a few reasonable Chinese restaurants and they cost double that of Singapore's," he said.

But this typically Singaporean complaint aside, Mr Wee is impressed with India. "It's a joy working with its smart and articulate people, and tackling the challenges that come along the way."

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