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SPEECH BY PRESIDENT C V DEVAN NAIR AT THE DINNER ORGANISED
BY THE SINGAPORE MALAYALEES TO CELEBRATE HIS APPOINTMENT AS
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE AT THE SHANGRI-LA
HOTEL ON SATURDAY, 23 JANUARY, 1982 at 8 PM

When the Prime Minister asked me to consider the presidency of our Republic, the fact that I was of Kerala origin did not enter the picture at all. Quite other considerations were taken into account. In my speech to the representatives of 50 Indian organisations on 28 December 1981, I had indicated what some of these considerations were. I need not repeat myself at this gathering.

I can assure you, however, that I have had no reason at any time to deplore my ancestry. On the contrary, the little I do know about my forbears and my antecedents, about Kerala and about things Malayalam, give me, if anything, cause for gratification.

Each of us, as individuals, whatever our ethno-cultural origins were, may succeed in putting up more or less impressive personal edifices. But only the shallow will admire the superstructure and ignore the foundation. There are no castles in the air. Much of what we are, physically in terms of dna, genes, chromosomes and what not, and culturally in terms of inherited drives, and of the values and standards we live by, can be traced back to our roots in the past. In my own case, the roots go back to Kerala, which is itself plugged into the millennial cultural richness which constitutes India. While I give equal respect to all the other great cultural traditions which mingle in our Republic, I do not for a moment regret my own roots.

On seeing an official photograph of mine recently, a friend remarked: "Good Lord! You look like a typical Malayalee." Not wanting to be rude, I refrained from observing that it would be a slur on the honour of my parents if I looked like a typical non-Malayalee of any kind. So I contented myself by saying: "That may well be. But please note that behind me flies the Singapore flag, and not any other." This again is something that none of us who are Singapore citizens should allow ourselves to forget.

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And what applies to us also applies to all Singaporeans. In late 1980, I was with the Prime Minister's party in Beijing. And I watched him speaking across the table with Premier Zhao Zhi-yang and, later on, with Vice-Chairman Deng Xiao-ping. Premier Zhao and Vice-Chairman Deng spoke in Mandarin, but the Prime Minister spoke in English, although he knows Mandarin. It was deliberate. A point had to be made, and it was made. It was this, we are different. Singaporeans are Singaporeans - not Chinese, Indian, Malay or what have you.

There are persons who hold that the absence of cultural, linguistic and religious homogeneity make it difficult for countries like Singapore to be nations, in the sense that Japan, for instance, is a nation. But this depends on the definition we choose. The late unlamented Josef Stalin defined a nation as follows: "A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture."

By this definition, several heterogeneous countries which we today accept as nations, would lose their nationhood. Those who will not qualify would include countries as polyglot as Switzerland, Belgium, the United States, India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore.

Fortunately, most of Stalin's definitions in politics, economics, culture, art and science have been discredited by time and experience. Even the generality of communist countries have ceased to swear by him.

A more sensible and pragmatic definition of a nation was that given by the Indian poet and philosopher, Sri Aurobindo, which went as follows: "A nation is not made by common blood, a common tongue or a common religion; these are only important helps and powerful conveniences. But wherever communities of men not bound by family ties are united in one sentiment and aspiration to defend a common inheritance from their ancestors, or assure a common future for their posterity, there a nation is already in existence."

The next generation of Singaporeans will inherit from the founding generation a common inheritance in the shape of the Singapore we know today, and they, like those before them, will strive to assure a common future for their posterity. There is no doubt about it. In Singapore, a nation is already in existence.
