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SPEECH BY MR S DHANABALAN, MINISTER FOR CULTURE AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS, AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE SIXTH CONGRESS OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN LIBRARIANS (CONSAL VI) AT SHANGRI-LA HOTEL ON MONDAY 30 MAY 83 AT 9.30 A.M.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the Sixth Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians.

I note that the theme of your Congress is "The Role of Librarians in the Information Revolution". Your theme at once heartens me as well as fills me with foreboding. It is fitting that librarians should be concerned with the technological advances in the storage, retrieval and transmission of information. Libraries have for most of their history been repositories of the written or printed word together with the art and illustrations that go with such records. It is only in this century that the records in the form of sound and the moving picture became a part of library records. But the greatest change has been the manner in which records are kept and in this the computer has been in the centre of the revolution.

But what you have rightly termed as a revolution is not merely the result of new forms of keeping records. It is a result of a number of factors some of which are worth noting. Firstly, this century has seen an explosion in new knowledge in the world of science. Secondly, new scientific inventions together with changes in social organisation have enabled the collection, processing and storage of data on a massive scale to be developed to a level which

could not even be dreamt of fifty years ago. Lastly, developments in mass communications now enable information to be transmitted in the wink of an eye to millions of people. It is inconceivable that these developments should leave the quiet world of libraries and librarians untouched. Thus I welcome your aim to seek to apply the new information technologies to enhance library services. If you ignore the new technology, you run the risk of becoming irrelevant in our rapidly developing societies.

I said that I also noted your theme with some foreboding. This may be attributed to my notion of a library which may be somewhat idealistic and even dated. I am aware that many of you come from highly specialised libraries tailored to meet the particular needs of an institution. But I am thinking of what is commonly termed a public library. I think of a library, especially a public library and the like, as a place which does not merely store information of what others have discovered and recorded. I think of the library as a repository of the records of man - his triumphs and failures, his good and evil, his travels and arrivals, his searchings and findings - in sum a place where the searcher can find more than information - where he can, if he searches diligently, find wisdom.

Young people today seem insatiable in their demand for information on the subjects of interest to their livelihood. This is not to be discouraged but I sometimes wish that their reading interests were not so narrow. In my previous job in a bank I had occasion to interview candidates for positions in the bank. Some were fresh graduates and others had some years of working life behind them. I was constantly surprised and disappointed at how little they had read. Apart from journals of finance and business their only other

reading seemed to be Time and Newsweek. Is it any wonder that so many think that all problems can be reduced to headline descriptions and that there are quick fix-it solutions to everything?

We need to remind ourselves that information is not wisdom nor is literacy education. Modern technology makes it easy to transmit information to others and even sugarcoat it to make it easy to go down. We can make a person literate and fill him with information but find it difficult to educate him or make him wise. No person can be informed about everything. The capacity of modern information and communication systems is immense - both in quantity and speed. The only limitations to what can be carried by the channels of information and communication are human limitations. Those who have to feed the channels and those who absorb what is transmitted in the channels are limited in their capacity. Thus information has to be selected for communication and the receiver has to be even more selective in deciding what to absorb. Without the wisdom and discernment to weigh the mass of information that is being poured out every day, people can easily be swayed, misled and led to grief. It is said that there is none so certain and cocksure as those who are ignorant. But those who are only half ignorant, who have some information without knowing its significance nor its measure, can be even more certain and decidedly more dangerous. As the Spanish philosopher of the seventeenth century, Gracian, wrote "Knowledge without sense is double folly".

The library must therefore be more than a source of information. My view is that you must aim to more than provide as much information as your users want in the most effective way. Information is important.

Let there be no misunderstanding. One does not become wise by meditating on one's navel. But the library must persuade the user to think, and to seek wisdom.

I wish you all a successful Congress and a pleasant stay in Singapore. I have great pleasure in declaring the Sixth Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians open.

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