

**PRESS RELEASE**

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**SPEECH BY MR S DHANABALAN, MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND MINISTER FOR CULTURE, AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE ARCHIVES AND ORAL HISTORY DEPARTMENT AT HILL STREET BUILDING AND PICTORIAL EXHIBITION "SINGAPORE 1819 TO 1980: ROAD TO NATIONHOOD" ON SATURDAY, 26 MAY 1984 AT 11.00 AM**

There is a growing awareness among Singaporeans in official and private circles of the need to preserve records of our past. We are more conscious of the need to collect written records and are beginning to have a new view of the buildings and artefacts of our past. There is increasing concern that we may create a sparkling new Singapore with no trace of the past.

I wish we had had a keener sense in the past of the need to preserve records. The absence of records - photographs, films, video tapes, etc. of life in Singapore even as late as from the 1930's is truly surprising. This was brought home very sharply when, for example, the Curriculum Development Institute wanted to produce the TV series "Making of a Nation". We had to go to the Archives in UK, Australia and elsewhere for records and even then what we found was precious little. Even our RTS was not conscious in its initial years about properly recording and preserving films of the stirring days of political struggle in early and mid-sixties. We were all too preoccupied with surviving the present to worry about recording it for the future. It is gratifying to note that there are at least some persons who felt the need to preserve records. When the Department interviewed people for the Oral History Unit's Japanese Occupation project, they produced ration cards, badges, medals, transport passes, diaries, etc. of the War Years. They have donated these to the Archives. But such instances are few.

Our climate works against the preservation of records. In the temperate countries one reads, not infrequently, of people discovering in attics and cellars items such as paintings, letters and manuscripts which are decades and even centuries old. Our climate and pests will never allow such preservation. But what has been even more of a cause for the loss of records is the rapid development and massive movement of population that Singapore has experienced. Since 1960 massive urban redevelopment and public housing programmes have resulted in more than 70 per cent of our population moving from slums and squatter areas into high rise flats. As a proportion of the population, such a massive shift within a period of 25 years has few parallels anywhere. It is only in cities devastated by war will we find anything close to it. Every time people move they discard what they consider as junk. The people who lived in crowded slum and squatter areas must have had little space to keep sentimental objects or outdated records. But among the rubbish left behind in abandoned slum and squatter areas there still must have been a wealth of material. If these materials had been preserved, many families would have vivid records of the life of their parents and grandparents. Much that was discarded as junk would be antiques today. Much that was discarded as useless bits of paper would be valuable records today.

Although it may be late in the day, I would like to appeal to those living in the older areas of Singapore which are being cleared for redevelopment, not to indiscriminately discard old records such as photographs, birth, marriage and educational certificates, ration cards, etc. The Archives & Oral History Department would be ready to assist in evaluating such records.

The Archives and Oral History Department started off as the National Archives and Records Centre in 1968 in the National Library at Stamford Road. The Oral History Unit

was established in 1979 and in early 1981, the two units, the National Archives and Records Centre and the Oral History Unit were merged to form the Archives and Oral History Department. The department has grown making it necessary to be housed in permanent accommodation.

The present accommodation in the Hill Street Building will have the following facilities:-

- 1) Public Search Room to accommodate 25 readers;
- ii) An Exhibition Room;
- iii) A Seminar Room;
- iv) 24 hours air-conditioned repositories;
- v) 2 Recording Rooms;
- vi) 2 Copying Rooms;
- vii) The Central Microfilm Unit; and
- viii) Bigger and better equipped conservation workshop.

The open house and pictorial exhibition "Singapore 1819 to 1980: Road to Nationhood" to mark this official opening will give members of the public a better insight into the facilities available and the work of the Department as well as the constitutional and political development of Singapore.

I have much pleasure in declaring open the new home of the Archives and Oral History Department.

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