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SPEECH BY PRESIDENT C V DEVAN NAIR ON THE OCCASION OF THE OPENING OF
KING EDWARD HALL AT NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE, KENT RIDGE
ON SATURDAY, 5 DECEMBER 1981 AT 10.30 AM

As we get deeper into the modern age of science and technology, our need for experts in the various disciplines will increase. This will involve greater and more intensive specialisation. We will therefore have fewer persons in our midst possessed of a wide and general culture. This will be a pity, for we will then have to deal with a plethora of experts, each with his own special jargon.

The expert has, perhaps unkindly, been defined as one who knows a great deal about his own limited (albeit important) field of study, but practically nothing about everything else.

We all know of arid dry-as-dust economists and engineers who think that poetry, literature and music are a sheer waste of time. We also know of poets who have a contempt for statistics. An education system which concentrates exclusively on the exact sciences must inevitably result in an uncultured and soulless society.

But to specialise exclusively in the arts and humanities would also invite serious trouble and social unrest. For one thing, poets and philosophers do not generally bake bread. For they are not distinguished as creators of material wealth and prosperity. And you would be well advised not to travel on a bridge built by a philosopher. Bridges to heaven, perhaps, but not ones to cross the Singapore or Kallang Rivers. Again, when you have a toothache, you don't go to a poet. You go to a dentist, however unpoetical he may be.

Too often men of the spirit fail to appreciate that the higher and nobler appetites of mankind cannot thrive on empty bellies. Equally often, the generators of economic growth and

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material wealth fail to appreciate that these are not ends in themselves, but only the necessary means to nobler ends. It is therefore the role of culture and education to help men recognise that material progress and spiritual growth are not mutually exclusive. In truth, they complement rather than cancel each other.

One of the major functions of an enlightened modern university is to produce specialists in various fields, who are at the same time rounded human beings, with some claim to the kind of general culture which makes for empathy with their fellow human beings. Much greater men than I have warned against the danger of tertiary institutions churning out men and women with what may be called "capsule minds". It is a serious deprivation to be completely encapsulated in a limited discipline, however socially valuable that discipline may be.

It is here that halls of residence in a university assume their unique value and significance. Indeed, I am specially pleased that my first visit to the NUS as your chancellor, finds me in a hall of residence rather than in the more academic atmosphere of a lecture theatre or seminar room.

There is something down to earth about a university hall because the residents, be they students or staff, are drawn from a variety of disciplines, are in daily fraternal contact with each other, and listen to each other's jargon. And precisely for this reason, they are less likely to find themselves orbiting in the far reaches of outer space, ignorantly and blissfully unaware of the rich variety and colour, the multitudinous configurations - subjective and objective - of the bewildering, disconcerting and harsh world of reality.

May I now advance, for your serious consideration, some views on what successful halls of residence should or should not be. I might preface my observations by stating that they are entirely my personal views.

There appears to be a general impression that at present, halls are merely residential quarters for students which close down during vacations. At best, they make possible a degree of socialising among hostelites not available to non-hostelites.

Halls need to be transformed into centres of intellectual life in the university. Indeed, the quality or level of general intellectual discourse in the university is dependent to a considerable extent on the level registered in the halls of residence; for the halls are the only means available in the university of continuing the formal discourse in lecture room and tutorial, in an informal atmosphere of friendly intercourse and debate so essential to intellectual health. In such an atmosphere, it is possible for the student to complete the specialised training he receives in his chosen discipline, by coming into fruitful contact with the various other disciplines of his friends.

It is necessary to consider ways and means of cultivating an atmosphere of discussion, debate, intellectual exchange. In other words, resuscitate the dead art of serious and informed conversation among our students, and thereby transform halls of residence from bed-and-breakfast rooms into vibrant centres of university life.

How? I might venture a few practical suggestions which do not by any means exhaust the possibilities available:

- (A) Dinner Talks - A tradition maintained by major European and American universities.
- (B) In addition to existing appointments, also appoint as honorary fellows or associates of halls, distinguished members of the community, parliamentarians, business leaders, senior civil servants, trade unionists, and cultural leaders, who will frequent the halls and chat with students informally.
- (C) Instead of putting up visiting lecturers and professors in hotels, why not place them in rooms specially set aside for them in halls where they can converse freely with students?
- (D) Perhaps younger lecturers and postgraduate students should be required to spend a portion of their time in residence in halls. Occupying as they do an intermediate position between senior academics and students, they may find it

- (D) easier than middle-aged lecturers and professors to enter into the life of undergraduates; and thus introduce, with their relatively greater experience and maturity, a more sophisticated note to the social and intellectual life of halls.
- (E) At the other end of the scale, perhaps it might be possible to induce a few of the nation's distinguished senior citizens, those who have retired from active service but have still much to give intellectually, to take up partial residence in university halls - somewhat like the late Mr E.M. Foster at King's College, Cambridge.

But all these suggestions are useless unless staff and students want halls to be active, intellectual centres. If they do, then we might expect students to be as diligent in organising talks, debates, forums, concerts, plays within the hostel, as they undoubtedly are in organising disco dances, fashion shows and football games, not that this is wrong, I only suggest that much more can be done.

And the necessary leadership must be forthcoming from the fellows and masters of halls: they must be able to form in hostelites an attitude of mind, a habit of comporting themselves in an intellectual society, which alone can help create the atmosphere we desire.

Bearing this in mind, masters and fellows of halls who are intellectually distinguished in their own right, and with an ability to generate a sense of intellectual stimulation around them, need to be selected.

In these and other ways, living in a hall of residence prepares you for your role as an executive or professional in the interdependent economic and cultural context of modern Singapore. Most of you have homes in Singapore, to which you return during weekends, but for the six days that you live here, you need to develop a high tolerance, respect and understanding for the neighbour whose recreation and study habits are different from yours.

I grant that it will take some time to achieve the goals I have put forward. For, with the completion of Sheares' Hall next to yours, there will be only 900 places for a student population in Kent Ridge of over 9,000. With the building of Raffles Hall at Kent Ridge, scheduled for completion in 1983, the number of places available will still fall far short of the total student population which by then is expected to be about 11,000.

Although there are not enough facilities for all students to do so, I hope that the majority of those who do not have the opportunity of staying in a hall will be able at least to attach themselves to a hall as non-resident members, so that they may be able to taste some aspects of hall living.

It is important for you to appreciate that you will have to create traditions that will build up the moral fibre and co-operative integrity of university life. Too much emphasis has been placed on rote learning from books, on memory regurgitation in examinations, and on individual achievement, to the exclusion of learning from each other's example and behaviour, of rational thinking about social and other problems perceived in anticipation, and of group achievement. If you are able to do this, you will cease being merely a degree holder in order to become something infinitely more valuable - a whole person.

Do not allow yourselves to forget that tertiary education in Singapore, as elsewhere, is heavily subsidised from public funds. Singaporeans will look up to you to fulfil the hopes put in you because of the sacrifices which they have made. As privileged persons, who have been able to make it to a tertiary institution, I hope you will prepare yourselves for making your own sacrifices, in the years ahead, for the generations which will follow you.

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