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ADDRESS BY PRIME MINISTER MR GOH CHOK TONG,
AT THE CENTRAL SIKH TEMPLE, AT TOWNER ROAD,
ON THURSDAY, 21 NOVEMBER 1991 AT 9.30 AM

I am very happy to join you today on the occasion of the 523rd anniversary of Guru Nanak's birth.

Among the many wise teachings of your religious founder, I want to mention just one of his precepts which Sikhs practice constantly and are justifiably known for - that of sharing and caring or Wand Chanka. The symbolic gestures we all made when we entered the Gurdwara testify to the way of life of Sikhs - of living on one's efforts, of caring, of giving.

I would like to expand on this theme today and share with you some thoughts on the Government's philosophy towards community self help.

All communities share the common aspiration of attaining a higher standard of living. We crystallized this in 1984 by targeting to reach the Swiss standard of living then by 1999. In other words, we felt we could level up to the Swiss per capita income in 15 years.

Today, our capita income is S\$20,000 (1984 prices). Our economy is expected to grow by about six per cent per year over the next few years. At this rate we can achieve our income target of S\$30,000 (1984 prices) per capita by 1999.

This income is the average for the country. Some will earn more than this, while others less. There will still be some Singaporeans whose income level will be considerably below S\$30,000 per annum.

Community Self - help

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One of our biggest tasks in this decade is to help this group of lower income Singaporeans to climb up to become lower middle income Singaporeans. It will be a long process requiring stamina, perseverance, and community help. But if each community works hard to help the lowest income group within its own community to progress, we can show results.

We have to concentrate on raising educational standards of the children from the lower income group. This is a task not just for the schools, but also for the parents and the community. We have also to prevent and resolve social problems, like juvenile delinquency and drug abuses. Every juvenile delinquent, every drug addict, is a loss to Singapore as much as it is a problem for the family.

A good family and a good upbringing is the best safeguard against such problems. For some drug addicts, help from community and religious groups reaps the best results. Hence our wanting to involve the different communities to deal with problems concerning members of their communities. Trying to solve individual social problem through a centralized government department will not be as effective as the community taking an interest in them. Community organizations know the problems of their community best. They can give warm, emotional support much better than an impersonal, efficient bureaucracy.

This is why the Government has chosen the “Many Helping Hands” approach to solving social problems. This does not mean Government withdraws its resources. They will continue to be available. But the emphasis is on the community helping its own members to overcome obstacles and improve themselves.

Operating Principles for the Organizations

But taking a community approach to solving problems has caused some unease. First, there was MENDAKI. Then AMP. Now Sinda has started operation and a Chinese development assistance scheme will be launched soon. Some have asked whether it was wise to organize self help groups along predominantly racial lines. They wondered whether we are not taking a step backward in nation building. Will these groups not compete against one another and vie for attention at the expense of overall national interests? Will we not be returning to the racial chauvinism of the 1950s and 60s, they asked?

I don't think so. The focus of these community self help groups is on raising education standards, solving social problems and uplifting itself. It is not done at the expense of other communities. There may be heightened awareness of each community's unique identity as they explore their own roots and help their own kith and kin, but the situation today is very different from the situation in the 1950s. Singaporeans understand better that in a multi-racial society, each community must not threaten others or feel threatened. Otherwise, there will be tension and instability and no community then can succeed in attaining its goal of a high standard of living. Nevertheless, I suggest that in developing community

based programs, we should bear these two points in mind. Firstly, we must continue to reaffirm our commitment to multi-racialism. Even while developing community based programs, we must do so in a spirit of tolerance and cooperation amongst the different communities in Singapore to enable us to work together as a multi-racial nation. Without this commitment, the fear that groups would work against one another could indeed come true. Secondly, community organizations must bear in mind that the central thrust of such community based programs is to uplift the less advantaged in the community. In doing so, there must be constant vigilance against using ethnic or religious appeal to boost one community above another or to play off one against another in promoting each community's program. All the community organizations involved in this challenge to help the Singaporeans in the lower income group should affirm these operating principles. In this way, we can tap the social and financial resources of each community to help those in need while ensuring that the effort will

strengthen Singapore as a multi-racial nation.

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The Contribution of the Sikh Community

The Sikh community is generally better off compared to the total population. A higher proportion of Sikhs (45 per cent) has secondary or higher qualifications as compared to the population as a whole (39 per cent). The Sikh labor force participation rate is higher than the national average (63.3 per cent as against 62.1 per cent). The percentage of Sikhs living in private housing and four and five room flats is also higher than the national average (59 per cent as against 52 per cent). Also, 92 per cent of Sikhs own the houses they occupy as against 90 per cent for the total population.

From the statistics, it also does not appear that the Sikh community has a disproportionate share of social problems. As a community, you are better off than the rest of the population.

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Despite your good record, Sikh professionals are still concerned over certain negative trends. The Sikh community carried out surveys between 1987 and 1988 to identify problems facing the Sikh community. It shows the care you have towards your fellow Sikhs.

I am particularly glad that your programs to resolve these problems are not inward looking. Your two Singapore Sikh lectures, the first on the Universal Tenets of the Sikh faith, and the second on the Concept of Caring and Sharing, promote harmony between different religions.

I am also pleased to learn that your leaders have paid extra attention to promoting Singapore Sikh values rather than adopt them lock, stock and barrel from overseas. In this connection, I understand that you are looking into the writing of your own textbooks which will emphasize Singapore Sikh values. This is a commendable effort.

As a community, you have done well. But it is right that you want to do more to help your fellow members. Yours is a small but distinguished community. It is a community that we as Singaporeans are proud to count amongst us.

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I wish all of you joy and further progress on the anniversary of Guru Nanak's birth.