

## PRESS RELEASE

### **PAYING TRIBUTE TO SINGAPORE'S MANY CONTRIBUTORS: NEW STATUES OF HISTORICAL FIGURES INSTALLED ALONG THE SINGAPORE RIVER**

**Singapore, 4 January 2019** – Four new statues of Sang Nila Utama, Tan Tock Seng, Munshi Abdullah and Naraina Pillai have joined the Sir Stamford Raffles statue at the Raffles Landing Site along the Singapore River. Commissioned by the Singapore Bicentennial Office (SBO), the sculptures represent a wider cast of characters that arrived on Singapore's shores in 1819, and before.

While the Singapore Bicentennial marks the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819 as a pivotal point in our history, it also recognises the diverse communities and people who have shaped Singapore over the years. Starting with the four new statues unveiled on 4 January 2019, SBO invites Singaporeans on a year-long discovery of our nation's cast of contributors and milestones from as far back as 1299.

Singaporeans will be familiar with Sang Nila Utama, the Palembang prince who first saw a vision of a lion and established the Singapura Kingdom in 1299. He provides a link to our longer history before 1819, which we hope to explore throughout the bicentennial year as well.

The other three historical personalities featured along the Singapore River all arrived in Singapore in 1819 and have made indelible literary, religious and cultural contributions to Singapore's society during their time. (Please refer to [Annex A](#) for more facts on these personalities)

- **Munshi Abdullah** – The gifted linguist first set foot in Singapore in 1819 as secretary and interpreter to Sir Stamford Raffles. He also worked as a teacher and writer, and is known for his early literary contributions to the Malay community.
- **Naraina Pillai** – Naraina Pillai set foot in Singapore in 1819, where he started off from scratch working as a clerk. He later became a successful entrepreneur and a respected community leader. He was also the island's first Indian building contractor, and contributed greatly to the Hindu community, including the construction of the Sri Mariamman Temple in 1827.
- **Tan Tock Seng** – Arriving in 1819, Tan Tock Seng became one of Singapore's most eminent philanthropists and a leader of the Chinese community. He contributed generously to charity, and is best known for being the main donor to Tan Tock Seng Hospital. He was the first Asian to serve as Justice of Peace.

The new statues will be on display alongside the Sir Stamford Raffles statue until 8 January, after which they will be shifted to different locations along the Singapore River promenade for the rest of 2019.

Mr Gene Tan, Executive Director of the Singapore Bicentennial Office, said, "While most might associate the Singapore Bicentennial with only the British and 1819, the appearance of the four additional statues clearly articulates the approach we are taking for this year-long effort. 1819 is an important point in our history, but before and after the British also came many people and communities. Even the four statues represent only a fraction of the huge cast of characters who contributed to the evolution of Singapore in our longer history of 700 years. Through the various events planned throughout 2019, we hope that Singaporeans will be able to broaden their understanding of how different communities, including their own, had a part to play in Singapore's history."



Mr Kwa Chong Guan, Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University said, "Different groups of men and women came to Singapore through various trading networks, contributing to Singapore's success as a port city. Singapore, like other port cities, be it Melaka in the fifteenth century, Venice in the sixteenth century or Quanzhou in the twelfth century, depended upon a cosmopolitan mix of trading communities and their trading networks to define the port city. Likewise, Singapore in the nineteenth century was defined by these traditional networks of trade that the Bugis, Malay, Arab and Indian traders brought to Singapore, as well as the deep and extensive networks of the Fujian merchants in the region and the more recent European "Agency Houses."

Professor Hadijah Bte Rahmat, Associate Professor and Head of Asian Languages and Cultures at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, said, "Singapore's roles, functions and achievements are diverse in multiple fields. They are not built by a single visionary man, but built by a multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-religious people, with richly diverse backgrounds and their human strengths. From the natives, locals, and migrants within the South-east Asian region and from all over the world, all have worked together to contribute, directly and indirectly to build its unique history, developments and identities."

For more information about the Singapore's history and cast of contributors, please visit [www.bicentennial.sg](http://www.bicentennial.sg).

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### **About the Singapore Bicentennial Office**

Part of the Prime Minister's Office, the Singapore Bicentennial Office (SBO) is committed to coordinating a nationwide commemoration that incorporates partner agencies and various community groups in programmes that contribute to a shared reflection and appreciation of Singapore's longer history. SBO is guided by an Advisory Panel comprising historians, archaeologists and community leaders, and supported by a diverse group of volunteers in this ground-up initiative.

Beyond events, SBO collaborates with many longstanding religious and educational institutions, associations and clans, as well as businesses and individuals, to provide research and resource support, even as they make plans to release a range of diverse projects and products. We hope that this will generate interest and spark reflection on our rich cultural heritage.

*#SGBicentennial*

**ANNEX A**  
**FACTSHEET ON FEATURED HISTORICAL PERSONALITIES**

## **Munshi Abdullah**

**Date of Arrival: 1819**

**Background:**

Munshi Abdullah was born in 1797 in Malacca. In addition to being Sir Stamford Raffles' secretary and interpreter, he was an author who also taught the Malay language to British and American missionaries. His linguistic and cultural knowledge was shared far and wide, helping to bridge communication and cultural gaps, and to facilitate business deals.

Abdullah made significant literary contributions to the Malay community- he was the first Malay author to introduce a shortened and more colloquial version of the language, marking the transition from classical Malay to modern Malay literature. In 1849, his autobiographical book *Hikayat Abdullah* (The Story of Abdullah) became one of the first Malay literary texts to be published commercially, making him the "father of modern Malay literature".

**Notable contributions:**

Munshi Abdullah is famously known as a gifted linguist who first arrived in Singapore as the appointed secretary and interpreter to Sir Stamford Raffles. He taught Raffles and several English personages the Malay language, and shared his knowledge on the local communities and their beautiful culture. He played a crucial role in Singapore's history as he was witness to the political and cultural developments of the time, offering a unique perspective, which he chronicled in his autobiography.

**Interesting fact:**

Munshi Abdullah was a gifted linguist and mastered Arabic, Tamil, Hindi and Malay.

## **Naraina Pillai**

**Date of arrival: 1819**

### **Background:**

Attracted by Sir Stamford Raffles' vision for Singapore, Naraina Pillai left Penang in 1819 and followed Raffles to Singapore, where he became chief clerk at the treasury department. Initially disappointed by the lack of development in Singapore, he turned adversity into opportunity by developing Singapore's first brick company at what is now Tanjong Pagar, and became the country's first building contractor. He also ventured into trading cotton goods and owned a storefront at Cross Street, which quickly became the largest cotton business in town.

Naraina Pillai contributed greatly to his community and was considered to be the de facto leader. He was pivotal in the construction of the first Hindu temple in Singapore. Sri Mariamman Temple was not only a place of worship, but also served as refuge and shelter for Indian immigrants before they were able to find accommodation and start working. It also housed the Hindu Institute to educate Indian boys. Today, the temple continues to be venerated by the local Hindu community.

His efforts to serve the Hindu community was recognised by the British, leading them to appoint him as chief of Indians. This gave him authority to settle disputes within the Indian community.

### **Notable contributions:**

Naraina Pillai was a successful entrepreneur and a respectable leader in the Indian community. He made his mark in history with the construction of the Sri Mariamman Temple in 1827 to serve the Hindu community. Today, the temple still stands in its original location and has been established as a National Monument.

### **Interesting fact:**

Pillai's cotton bazaar at Cross Street was razed to the ground in a fire in 1822. He persuaded his suppliers of cotton, the British merchants, to let him repay them for all the credit he had taken on the large amounts of cloth. All but one agreed to give him five years to repay his debts, and he worked hard to repay that one person, John Morgan, 2,000 dollars within two years.

## **Sang Nila Utama**

### **Date of Arrival: 1299**

#### **Background:**

According to the Sejarah Melayu (or the Malay Annals), Sang Nila Utama was a 13<sup>th</sup>-century Palembang prince from the Srivijaya ruling house.

#### **Notable contributions:**

Sang Nila Utama (also known as Sri Tri Buana) is said to have established the Kingdom of Singapura when he landed on the island of Temasek in 1299. He had a vision of an animal with a red body, black head and a white breast, that was known in ancient times to be a lion. This was taken as good omen and a sign of good fortune, as such, he established a new city and renamed it "Singapura" or "Lion City".

#### **Interesting fact:**

Sang Nila Utama was first attracted by the beauty of Singapore's beach. He described the shores of the island of Temasek to be so white that it looked like a sheet of cloth from atop a rock in the Riau islands. Archaeologists have found the white sands at the Padang, and it is believed to be the same sands that first captivated Sang Nila Utama.

## **Tan Tock Seng**

### **Date of Arrival: 1819**

#### **Background:**

Tan Tock Seng arrived in Singapore when he was just 21 years old from Melaka following William Farquhar's call for Melakan merchants, craftsmen and workers to Singapore in 1819. He became a small business owner and gradually expanded his businesses. He entered into the property speculation, making him a wealthy Chinese merchant.

#### **Notable contributions:**

Tan Tock Seng came from humble beginnings, but he's widely recognised as one of Singapore's most renowned philanthropists and pioneers.

Tan Tock Seng's financial contributions funded essential public services, including the construction of the Chinese Pauper Hospital – the predecessor of today's Tan Tock Seng Hospital. Tan also gathered rich towkays (business owners) in Singapore to commit their contributions to the hospital, whose land was donated by Syed Omar Aljunied. The establishment of the hospital was a crucial moment in Singapore's history, as it allowed the poor and sickly, improved access to healthcare.

Tan Tock Seng became Singapore's first Asian Justice of Peace, helping to settle disputes in the community. He also worked to attract more traders to Singapore's ports through his networks to Melaka and China. He was the biggest donor in the construction of Thian Hock Keng Temple at Telok Ayer Street, Singapore's oldest temple that was developed as one of the centres of community life, which also looked after the welfare of newly arrived Chinese immigrants.

#### **Interesting fact:**

Tan Tock Seng owned properties that covered 50 acres of land, which stretched from the Padang all the way to High Street and Tank Road. He also owned a block of shophouses at Ellenborough building, and a 14-acre fruit plantation opposite the St Andrew's Mission Hospital.