

Address by External Affairs Minister, Shri Pranab Mukherjee at the Annual Convocation of the Aligarh Muslim University

10/03/2007

Hon'ble Justice A.M. Ahmadi, Chancellor of the University,
Vice Chancellor Mr. Naseem Ahmad,
Members of the Faculty,
Members of the Academic Council,
Members of the Court,
Graduates of the year,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am most grateful for the opportunity given to me to address you from this podium which has been graced by some of the greatest stalwarts of our country.

As I stand before you, I cannot but recall the founder of this institution, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, who with his vision, his drive, his enthusiasm and his relentless sense of purpose, laid the foundations of this University and imbued it with a unique character and personality. Because of these solid foundations, the Aligarh Muslim University is today not just a shining star of academic achievement in India, but the impact of its scholarship is also felt in different corners of the world. This impact has emerged from the large number of its students who hold distinguished positions in different countries and from the academic and research contributions that this University and its students have made in different disciplines.

It is impossible to stand at this podium and not reflect on the influence of Sir Syed, as well as his continuing relevance. Sir Syed was truly a "renaissance" personality; his interests ranged from botany and town planning to history, religion, culture and politics. And he wrote and commented on all these subjects with extraordinary enthusiasm and vigour, setting out his views clearly and inviting discussion and debate. The thousands of pages containing his views, reflections and meditations are a treasure that scholars have pored over and, snatching out isolated sentences and paragraphs, used in an attempt to define this complex personality.

But Sir Syed cannot be defined by simplistic labels. And, as he himself would have urged – his writings should be seen, above all, in the context of the debates that were raging around him on specific issues at that time. It is true that several of his reflections have a contemporary value. But even they cannot be detached from the context in which they were originally made.

I personally believe that Sir Syed was a multi-faceted personality who did not allow his thinking and understanding to stagnate; he constantly refreshed his mind with new insights and influences. While he was deeply concerned about Muslim "backwardness" and anxious that the community take advantage of modern developments in science & technology and other aspects of western achievement, Sir Syed was himself a product of India's composite culture, which had been enriched by a variety of different influences over several millennia and which he strongly upheld.

Throughout its history, India has had continuous interactions with diverse peoples from Central Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, Egypt and Africa, in later years, with the West. These interactions have made India comfortable with the languages and cultures of foreign peoples in our extended neighbourhood. Today, the rich tapestry of our vibrant and composite culture is the product of these seamless engagements. Islam brought with it not only the message of equality and brotherhood, but also a wealth of cultural and artistic achievements.

These interactions and engagements occurred at various levels, between scholars, religious and temporal figures, poets, artists, and administrators. They also took place between common people - farmers and labourers - who were victims of the same feudal order that left them in want and penury in equal measure. The same people, however, also shared joyous occasions - births, marriages, festivals, as well as the sorrows of drought, flood, war and loss of loved ones.

Today, we recall a few names of great rulers and warriors, but every Indian household echoes with the names of the saints, the poems and the songs of our Bhakts and Sufis – Moinuddin Chisti, Nizamuddin Auliya, Mirabai, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Dyananeshwar, Namdeo and Tukaram. This common religion of love and brotherhood is echoed in this song of Kabir:

“O Seeker, where dost thou seek me?
Lo! I am beside thee.
I am neither in the temple nor in the mosque:
I am neither in Kaaba nor in Kailash:
Neither am I in rites and ceremonies.
Nor in Yoga and renunciation.
If thou art a true seeker, thou shalt at
Once see Me; thou shalt meet me”. Unquote

This composite culture of ours impacted on all aspects of daily life, food, clothing, music and art. Muhammad Mujeeb has described that most effectively when he says:

Quote:

"Religion became the religion of the people. Then, the spoken languages of the people became literary languages. We have the beginnings of Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi and Sindhi literature. Further, the city became the centre of culture, tailored clothing, came into general use, simplicity was discarded in favour of a life enriched and complicated by a vast increase in the articles of daily use, manners became elaborate and were, so to say, codified in the form of a recognized etiquette". Unquote.

This rich composite culture of ours continued to be nourished in succeeding decades. In our own times, the poet, Mirza Ghalib, rejected the empty ritualism of religion, and Mohd. Iqbal echoed the enduring strength of our culture thus:

"For me, every particle of my country's dust is a deity.
Come, let us remove all that causes estrangement,
Let us reconcile those that have turned away from
each other, remove all signs of division". Unquote.

It was the strength and endurance of our composite culture that laid the foundations of India's contemporary secularism, which finds expression in our Constitution. It is true that in the events that led to our freedom, discordant notes were sounded, which culminated in the partition of our country on a religious basis. Now, with the wisdom of hindsight, certain obvious truths can be reiterated and reaffirmed. *First*, that the forces promoting partition on a communal basis were consistently supported by our imperialist masters, who saw in this division a long term value in terms of their strategic interests in South, Central and West Asia. *Second*, recent history has clearly demonstrated that nationhood needs stronger and more enduring values than mere religious identity; and, *third*, in spite of consistent challenges, the Indian people have continued to adhere to and vigorously uphold the core national values of democracy and secularism to which we committed ourselves in 1947.

I would like to emphasize at this point that however pervasive our national values and however widespread the popular support to them, they still need to be repeatedly reaffirmed, nourished and reinvigorated. Every political order, but particularly a democratic political order, has within itself individuals, groups, and movements that have alternative visions of history and of the future; they march to a different beat and sing a different tune. All nations, thus, periodically pass through situations when the established order is challenged. At such times, the people of the nation have to delve deep into their minds and souls and either reaffirm their core values or accept the fact that they are no longer relevant and should be transformed or replaced. The battle for the preservation of our core and founding principles is therefore a battle that we have to fight every day.

India has not been immune to this challenge. There are those within our body politic who reject the version of our popular history which exalts our composite culture, and, instead, define our history and our nationhood in exclusivist terms that enhances the status of one particular group at the expense of others.

I do not believe in the exclusivist approach. I remain convinced that India's destiny lies in squarely facing up to this challenge to our core values. But this challenge cannot be met through emotive sloganeering: it should be taken seriously and confronted with the full force of our intellect, and our deep commitment to and our broad engagement with the political and social processes of our country. In the debate pertaining to the idea of India, we are all denied the luxury of academic detachment. We have to enter the debating hall and vigorously combat elements preaching the exclusivist ideology with all its passionate simplification and alluring appeal.

I am aware that the assault on our secular order is taking place even as there are deep concerns about the standing of the larger Muslim community in India, which, particularly in north India, is seen as being deprived and marginalized. No nation can aspire to greatness when large sections of its population are excluded from the benefits of national achievement and progress. I would like to convey to you from this historic podium that as a responsible and responsive Government, we are deeply concerned about the status of our deprived communities, including the Muslim community, and we stand committed to ensuring that matters pertaining to their welfare and progress are addressed.

Complex issues of socio-economic development cannot be taken care of through a simplistic adherence to the so-called "trickle-down" theory of economics. What is called for is vigorous governmental action at the grass-roots level where such deprived communities exist. Our government will not shy away from this responsibility, as we know full well that we will be judged by the extent to which we bring change in the lives of our marginalized masses.

Ladies & Gentlemen,

The Western world experienced the single largest act of terrorism five-and-a-half years ago when the events of September 11 took place in the United States. Sadly, our experience in India was much older, when, more than 25 years ago, proxy wars were unleashed upon us in an attempt to alienate sections of our people who had always been deeply committed to India's traditions and its modern nationhood. We have paid a very high price in combating this externally-sponsored terror and upholding our core national values. For most of this period, we struggled alone, as the international community failed to understand the impulses and full implications of what we were combating. The realizations that have dawned today that terrorism is indivisible, that there are no good terrorists, that this scourge affects both its victim as well as its sponsor, are welcome, even though tragic in that they have come at the cost of thousands of innocent lives. To my mind, the only way forward is for the international community to avoid the trap of semantics and declare a policy of zero tolerance to terrorism, anywhere and everywhere.

However, even as we combat terrorism, we firmly reject the theses coming out of some chauvinistic quarters that any particular religion glorifies this crime against humanity. This entire proposition is a non sequitur.

At the same time, we cannot but be deeply troubled by the considerable turmoil that different Islamic countries, especially in the Middle East, are experiencing. It is doubly tragic that proponents of a hard, literalist and exclusivist brand of Islam have intervened vigorously, and often violently, in public discourse to question and attack the Islam of piety, moderation and accommodation, features that have defined this great religion over several centuries.

In times of crisis, it is useful to refresh our memories with a scrutiny of the essential message of our faiths and to draw from them appropriate lessons for our troubled contemporary times. I know this University has nurtured some of the greatest Islamic scholars of modern times who have made a significant contribution to the understanding of this great faith that has been part of India from within a few years of its inception. I do not pretend to have their scholarship but I would like to share with you my understanding of only two from among Islam's numerous essential values.

Firstly, about reason. Throughout his life, Prophet Muhammad spread his message and converted people to Islam through reason and personal example. He did not resort to force, magic or miracle; he valued intellect and stressed the importance of reason. There are numerous verses in the Quran which admonish one to shun coercion and exercise persuasion and patience.

Secondly, about knowledge. The Quran repeatedly points mankind to knowledge: *ilm* is the second-most used word in the Quran after the name of God. Human beings are told to use their minds in at least 300 places. The acquisition and the imparting of knowledge were highly commended by the Prophet, who said:

“The pursuit of knowledge is a divine commandment for every Muslim...

That person who will pursue the road of knowledge, God will direct him to the road of Paradise; and verily the angels spread their arms to receive him that seeketh after knowledge; and everything in heaven and earth will ask grace for him. Verily the superiority of a learned man over a worshipper is like that of the full moon over all the stars.”

Unquote

David Lelyveld, in his seminal work on Aligarh's "First Generation", notes that, in Sir Syed's view, *ilm* was "a kind of spiritual electricity communicated by the touch of men who possessed it." Sir Syed himself went on to say: "Ignorance is the mother of poverty."

Ladies and gentlemen of the graduating class; I submit to you that if you hold fast to these two principles, reason and knowledge, as the guiding lights of your everyday life, not only will you go far, but you will also render a great national service.

Friends,

I clearly see a dual challenge before us. First, the challenge of ensuring that the fruits of our national achievement are shared in equal measure by all our communities, particularly those excluded and deprived. And second, for India to play a pro-active role in addressing the challenge posed to the international community by those who reject the essential values of Islam and

propagate a brand of the religion that has no justification in its history, politics and cultural values.

I had reiterated earlier our Government's unequivocal commitment to achieve, through robust governmental action, the upliftment of the Muslim community. I also believe that India, with its rich history of linkages with other parts of Asia, and its adherence to the values of democracy and secularism, is well-equipped to participate in the global effort that rejects the "clash-of-civilizations" thesis and promotes dialogue, understanding and cooperation among different role-players in the international arena.

You will all agree with me that facing these twin challenges is not the responsibility of the Government alone; all of us are participants and all of us are role players in it. The extent of India's influence and authority in the global arena will emerge from the strength of our commitment to the core values of democracy and secularism and our success in addressing the needs of the most deprived among us

Much of the discussion in India regarding secularism ultimately ends up with becoming a discussion about the nature of the secular state. However, much more important than a secular state is a secular citizen, the secular temperament of an individual. As long ago as 1948, Pandit Nehru raised this issue with the students of Aligarh Muslim University in his Convocation Address, when he stood at this podium and said:

“You are Muslim and I am Hindu. We may adhere to different religious beliefs or to none; but that does not take away from the cultural inheritance that is yours as much as mine.

Do you believe in a nation state which includes people of all religions and is essentially secular... or do you believe in a religious, theocratic conception of a state which regards people of other faiths as beyond the pale?” Unquote

The importance of the secular temperament is the weapon that citizens in democratic, multi-cultural societies have to use against attempts by motivated parties to convert religious or ethnic communities into political communities or vote banks; such politicization in time leads to the general communalisation of religious or ethnic communities.

How are we to develop this secular temperament, this spirit of tolerance, goodwill and understanding? Indian tradition, suffused with lessons from Islamic tradition, provides clear answers to this. Humanism and scientific knowledge are the natural legacy of mankind; they are not the exclusive preserve of the West. Just as in the past, the Dark Ages led to the Age of Reason and Enlightenment in Europe (substantially due to the influence of Islamic science, technology and culture), we Indians too, with a modern, forward-looking spirit, can transform our lives and bridge the knowledge-gap between us and other advanced societies.

The Indian, strengthened by his enduring commitment to the nation's democratic and secular order, is now poised to respond to Iqbal's call:

*Khudi ko kar buland itna,
ke har taqdeer se pehley,*

*Khuda bande se khud poochhe:
bata teri raza kya hai?*

[Raise yourself to such heights, oh man,
that before writing your fate,
the Almighty Himself asks his Creature:
tell me What is your destiny?

In the next few decades, the "taqdeer", the destiny, of India is to emerge as a knowledge super power. Indeed, the growth of India as a knowledge economy is a vindication of Sir Syed's dream, which led him to create this great institution. He had presciently observed that it is the categorical verdict of all the nations and great seers of the world that national progress depends on education and training (of the people). Partnership in the knowledge economy is something that offers prospects of a most potent partnership in the 21st century. Through support to the huge knowledge and research base in laboratories and universities in India, we can bring 'together capital and science and technology with innovation to create intellectual property and launch new economic ventures. This is another area where the role of Universities like Aligarh becomes crucial.

The last decade has witnessed accelerated Indian economic growth and the speed continues to increase. India is slated to be the third largest economy in the world with great strength in the knowledge economy based on human resources. It will be on the basis of the strength of young people, like the many I see before me today, that India is poised to take great strides forward. It is to be the work of those of you who are graduating today to take the country on its way to greater heights.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Having been invited here in my capacity as the External Affairs Minister of India, I cannot conclude without a few words about my current charge.

India's Foreign Policy is a product of its history, geopolitical setting and the needs and aspirations of its people as distilled by its democratic institutions. This policy is inspired by the vision of our founding fathers, in particular Pandit Nehru, and is nourished by a tradition of continuity and consensus. It has also to reflect our national ethos of secularism and democracy. It has to take this message to our friends in the region and beyond. This is what we have been doing. As India grows, its message of peace and hope will echo more forcefully through the world. It is a message of harmony, peaceful coexistence, economic prosperity and abhorrence of violence. I see Indian foreign policy playing a greater role in our economic renaissance. The primary task of Indian foreign policy has to be the facilitation of India's developmental processes, so that the fruits of our success reach all our people. Towards this end, we need to leverage our international partnerships. Our focus in the coming decade should be on promoting trade and investment flows, in assisting the modernization of our infrastructure, in assuring predictable and affordable energy supplies and in securing the widest possible access to technologies.

The other major goal for Indian foreign policy is to create a new paradigm for our neighbourhood. The strength and growth of our region and its prosperity is a necessary pre-requisite for India's own rise as a major power. As the largest country in South Asia with land and sea borders with all its neighbours in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), India has to assume greater responsibility for the region's challenges. Our foreign policy has to pay particular attention to each and every one of our bilateral relationships in the neighbourhood, from Myanmar to Afghanistan, and create a mutually beneficial framework. I would like to reaffirm that India's neighbours can and should share in our drive for prosperity. A modernization of the

infrastructure in the Indian sub-continent will promote freer flows of goods and services that can transform the entire region. In more ways than simply economic, the future of the Indian sub-continent depends on whether this open mindedness prevails over the more traditional mindsets. On its part, India has indicated its willingness to cooperate with all its neighbours and to work with them for a better future.

In this endeavour, India looks to its sons and daughters all over the country, and that includes those present here today, to give a collective voice to our aspirations for peace and development, unity in diversity and of a nation on the move to take its rightful place in the world. In this, the institutions of our democracy and our educational institutions, such as the Aligarh Muslim University, are playing a critical role. I have no doubt that they will continue to do so in the future as well. I wish all success to the University and its students in their endeavour towards the noble cause of the development of the nation.

With these words, I would like to thank you again for doing me the honour of inviting me to address you today.

May the Almighty's blessings be with you always.

Thank you.