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CONFLICT AND COEXISTANCE
in our age

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by

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Lord Howe, Dr Nizami, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen: I must straightaway declare my partiality.

I love that other place where I first met my husband thirty-five years ago and where his grandfather, India's first Prime Minister, took his Tripos.

But Oxford also has a claim on my loyalty. My mother-in-law, Indira Gandhi, whose portrait I presented to Somerville College this morning, went up to Oxford during 1937–39.

Oxford has made notable contributions not only to the spread of the wisdom of the western world, but also to the understanding of the civilisations of the East. For the people of India, Oxford will always be linked with the names of Monier-Williams, Max Mueller and S. Radhakrishnan, who enabled the world to understand the profundity and eternal relevance of India's ancient thought. A number of noted Indian political leaders, historians, economists, sociologists and scientists have been trained at this great citadel of learning. And it is a matter of pride that a scholar from our state of Uttar Pradesh is the Director of this Centre.

Rabindranath Tagore once described Oxford as a symbol of the undying spirit of man. That spirit is reflected in the activities of this Centre whose proclaimed objective is to increase the mutual knowledge and understanding between the Islamic and the western world. Among the distinguished statesmen who have preceded me here, several have been notable Islamic scholars. I cannot lay claim to scholarship but I take the expression "Islamic World" more to be a political figure of speech than a term with clear and precise geographical boundaries. There are more Muslims in India, than in any other country save Indonesia. Similarly, there are more Hindus in India than in any other country. There are also more Christians in India than in many countries recognised as Christian. But India is not a Hindu country or a Muslim country or a Christian country. It belongs to all of them and the millions of followers of other religions as well.

Over the past thirteen centuries, Islam has influenced Indian civilisation in its various facets. The works of Islamic historians like Al-Biruni still remain standard references on our country. The great achievements of Indian astronomers and mathematicians in the middle of the first millennium were transmitted by Islamic scholars to the rest of the world. What would the modern world be without the zero and without the system of numerals—both Indian inventions that were propagated by Central Asians and Arabs. Indian art and architecture, literature and poetry, language, music and philosophy, and even textiles and crafts, have all been enriched by Islam. The eclectic Sufi tradition is an integral part of Indian Islam. The interaction of Sufism with the Bhakti movement gave rise to several egalitarian and reformist orders. It was Dara Shikoh's translation of the Upanishads into Persian that served as the basis of the discovery of this treasure by the world at large. India has also had a decisive impact on Islamic thought, and some of the greatest Islamic philosophers, theologians and poets have hailed from the sub-

continent. The practice of Islam itself in the sub-continent reflects local influences and represents the synthesis with existing beliefs and values. This also reveals the enormous scope that Islam provides for a variety of spiritual experiences.

Indian literature extolling our composite culture and heritage is vast. I recall particularly the seminal contributions of four prominent Indians, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Azad. Maulana Azad is one of the most erudite scholars of Islam in modern times. He was among the closest colleagues of Mahatma Gandhi and a front-rank leader of the Indian Freedom Movement. In his Presidential address to the plenary session of the Indian National Congress in 1940, he said: I quote

I am a Muslim and profoundly conscious of the fact that I have inherited Islam's glorious traditions of the last thirteen hundred years. I am not prepared to lose even a small part of that legacy.... I am equally proud of the fact that I am an Indian, an essential part of the indivisible unity of Indian nationhood, a vital factor in its total make-up without which its noble edifice will remain incomplete, I can never give up this sincere claim. It was India's historic destiny that its soil should become the destination of many different caravans of races, cultures and religions. Even before the dawn of history's morning, they started their trek into India and the process has continued since (unquote).

Students of Indian history are certain to remind you that in Maulana Azad's own lifetime, many Muslims in India did not think like him and opted for a separate state of their own. But more Muslims remained in India than those who chose Pakistan. In recent years some political parties have been proclaiming that India belongs to the majority community. But have no doubt. Although their voices are loud and figure prominently in the media, they are a handful. Secularism is India's destiny because her people have willed it. The founding fathers of the Indian nation were men of wisdom and insights. They knew that religion is a vital force in India that should not be legislated away. As was often the case, Gandhiji, a deeply religious man, said it best: I quote

I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to blow about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. (unquote)

To say this is not to deny the fact that there have been numerous periods in our history when rulers attempted to spread particular religions with force. But theirs were singularly unproductive times. The radiant ages of Indian history when the fame of India spread in the world were those ages when tolerance prevailed. Periods of economic expansion were also periods of great spiritual achievements. And economic prosperity and social amity went hand-in-hand—a lesson not without its modern-day relevance.

India is a land of the greatest diversities and infinite varieties. I use the plural advisedly. It is a country with at least 18 major languages and over 400 important dialects. It is a land that has given rise to four of the world's major religions. As I mentioned earlier, it is home to the world's second largest Muslim population. It welcomed Christianity long before Europe embraced it. India has always offered refuge to people fleeing from religious persecution whether they be Jews or Zoroastrians. It is a society with over 4000 ethnic communities or castes or endogamous groups. It is a land comprising different ecological and cultural regions each with its own distinctive history. India is thus a multi-religious, multi-linguistic, multi-ethnic and multi-regional civilisation without a parallel.

The record of a relatively young Indian nation-state in managing these bewildering array of diversities, admittedly amidst trials and tribulations, is one of the remarkable achievements of contemporary times. Jawaharlal Nehru described India as: I quote

an ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously though outwardly there was diversity and infinite variety among our people, everywhere there was that tremendous impress of oneness, which had held all of us together for ages past, whatever political fate or misfortune had befallen us. (unquote)

One of the defining principles of contemporary India is Unity in Diversity. But there is something more. India exemplifies a complex Unity *through* Diversity, a society in which the celebration of diversity strengthens the bonds of our modern nation. I might add that India's diversities are not just numerous. They are also alive and assertive.

It is India's multi-layered parliamentary democracy that provides the framework within, which all of our peoples' voices are heard and their aspirations pursued. Democracy has taken firm root in India and has proved its resilience time and again. It is an instrument both of representation and empowerment. The flexibility of our Constitution, has helped us accommodate diversities in a peaceful and negotiated manner. Affirmative action embedded deeply into the fabric of our democracy is giving new hope to the disadvantaged sections of society, not least of which are women. Today, there are over a million of them, elected representatives transforming our countryside. The creation of new states has kept centrifugal tensions at bay, and the reconfiguration of India's internal geography, has been an important element in managing its diversities, while adhering to the rule of law.

Tremendous social ferment is taking place throughout the country. This churning does, on occasions, result in conflict. From the outside, its scale may get magnified, and it may appear that

India is frequently in turmoil. The truth is that, at any given point of time., the vast majority of our people live in harmony and peace. There is., indeed, something powerful that gives strength and resilience to our society even as it is subject to varied stresses and strains. And that something is secularism and democracy—two complementary forms of tolerance as the Mexican Nobel, Laureate Octavio Paz once put it.

We are meeting against the background of growing international terrorism and the fall-out of what has come to be known as 9/11. What is striking and remarkable is that international terrorist networks do not seem to have a hold on Indian Muslims. That is entirely because our political and social framework accommodates plurality in substantial measure. All over the world, an impression has been created that Islam and terrorism are inseparable. The fact that there are any number of terrorist organisations whose members subscribe to other religions is conveniently forgotten. India has been a continuous victim of cross-border terrorism. Both Hindus and Muslims have been targeted alike. This is particularly so in our state of Jammu and Kashmir where it is evident that the terrorists are acting in pursuance of the foreign policy of our neighbour to the west. It would be wrong to think that religion is their motive. Nevertheless, I should point out that, by the postures it adopts and the actions it takes, this neighbour provides a ready handle to those who stoke communal antagonisms within India. There are also religious and political leaders on both sides who feed on each other's passions.

Terrorism has no religion. In fact, it is the antithesis of religion, for the essence of all religions is compassion. A major effort has to be made to enable people to appreciate this truth. Inter-faith dialogue and communication at various levels and in different forums, has to be sustained, to help improve mutual understanding. Religious extremism very often is born out of perceived threats. These threats can be dealt with only through analysis, debate and engagement. This Centre has an important role to play in this regard.

The new challenge that the world will face in this evolving century, is decentralised terrorism on the part of well-organised political and ethnic groups armed with sophisticated weaponry. Their aim is to create panic amongst the largest numbers of innocent men, women and children. Humankind must urgently move to deal with this menace caused by zealots who deliberately misuse religion.

Terror should not be combated with greater terror. Though no end can justify mindless violence, ultimately the roots of terrorism have to be located in political, social and economic factors. Prosperity can breed terrorism as much as poverty can. A globalisation process that is seen to be inequitable and destabilising of cultural moorings can trigger terrorist mindsets. A political system that is closed and does not fulfil the aspirations of the people can create conditions which encourage dangerous ideologies.⁷

9/11 was a colossal tragedy and all of us reached out spontaneously to America in that moment of grief. It is regrettable that the world woke up to the threat of terrorism only after the horrific events of that day. Terrorism cannot, and should not, be dealt with in a selective and segmented manner within the framework of individual nation-states and their priorities. Now that all of us are aware of the horrendous consequences of international terrorism, and the threat of weapons of mass destruction, we must sustain a collective campaign against them with single-minded focus. This campaign should be framed and implemented on a clear understanding that terrorism is indivisible, international and is perpetrated not only by non-state actors but also by some governments, as an instrument of their state policy. The approach that says, "the terrorism I face is of higher priority than the terrorism you face" is illogical, and has dangerous implications for global stability and security. Equally grave is the cross-border flow of funds through different channels that help support terrorist organizations. This must be dealt with comprehensively and globally.

It has become fashionable to talk, of an impending "clash of civilisations". The Indian experience strongly disproves this approach. The concept of a deep fault line across world religions and its resulting inevitably in conflict, lends itself to mischievous distortions and misrepresentations, both internationally and within our own societies. Complex political, social and economic realities cannot be reduced to a simplistic confrontation between religions. All of us need to guard against this.

Cherishing and upholding tolerance at home, it is but natural that India should champion co-existence amongst the nations of the world as well. *Panchsheel*—the five principles of peaceful co-existence derived from the Buddha's teachings and given contemporary relevance by Jawaharlal Nehru—still holds great meaning. Let me recapitulate what these principles are: mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence. Conflict and coexistence cannot be managed by any one single country, howsoever well-meaning and powerful it may be. There is urgent need to redesign international institutions so that they reflect contemporary realities. They must have an effective say in the management of global issues. The most recent Security Council resolution on Iraq has given multilateralism a fresh lease of life -and we hope that this will be a long enough lease for the UN to be renewed and restructured. Globalisation will prove equitable and sustainable only if serious attention is paid to its governance both within and across nations.

The USA is now the world's pre-eminent power in every sense of the term. But the paradox of this power is that it cannot afford to act unilaterally. Many in the United States are impatient with multilateralism, but in today's inter-dependent world, there is simply no alternative to working in concert and collaboration with each other. We fervently hope that the United States recognises the desirability and feasibility of multilateralism. At the same time, other countries

have a responsibility to keep the USA involved and committed to international agreements and institutions.

Let me now turn to South Asia, where one-fifth of humanity resides. Our aim is that this region must be free of tensions so that the seven countries can individually and collectively address common economic, social and ecological problems—and these are present in abundance. How long can we afford to be prisoners of the past? The future beckons. We owe it to our own people to chart a new course in a bold and an imaginative manner. The large and gifted sub-continental diaspora has an important role to play here.

I want to say a few words on West Asia, a region with which India has long had an intimate cultural and economic relationship. We recognise the rights of the Palestinian people to a viable state of their own as well as the right of Israel to live within secure borders. While we condemn all forms of violence and terrorism, we believe that there can be no lasting peace in West Asia without the legitimate concerns of the Palestinian people being addressed meaningfully.

Growing economic and strategic cooperation between India and Israel does not make us insensitive to this reality. We have watched closely the developments relating to Iraq in recent months. As a founding member of the UN, India is deeply committed to the principles of its charter. It is our view that the question of Iraq cannot be dealt with unilaterally. Concepts like "regime change" are fraught with grave dangers.

I would like to say a few words about the State of Jammu & Kashmir, where the people voted in the recent elections fearlessly, in spite of heavy odds. These elections are a decisive watershed, because they re-establish the vitality and durability of our democracy. The world community must appreciate the new expectations of the people of Jammu & Kashmir for ending of this spiral of terrorist inspired violence and killings. Jammu & Kashmir defines India's secular nationhood. Of course, it is a special case and that is recognised as such in the Indian Constitution. India has respected that distinct character. There has, for example, been no attempt made to alter the demographic character of the state or to stifle its cultural and religious heritage. And Jammu and Kashmir, it must not be forgotten, is a crucible of Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist cultures. The newly elected coalition government is devoting itself to reducing the alienation of the people. This, you will appreciate, will take some time. But we are determined to maintain the momentum of this process.

I started this lecture by recalling India's composite heritage. I then spoke about how we are successfully managing its many diversities. I moved on to talk about international and regional terrorism and dealt with some aspects of our foreign policy. Let me end by once again underscoring that diversities and multiple identities have defined India for millennia. But there are grave dangers that they could well be used to divide us. This is the central challenge

confronting the overwhelming number of our people who are wedded to a vision of an India that is one and many at the same time. That oneness must be reinforced. That variety must be nurtured. As we look back, we can derive some satisfaction that we have put in place a system of ideas and institutions to ensure that this happens. It is, by no means, smooth sailing. But political democracy is strong enough, social diversity is valued enough, and economic development is robust enough to help us navigate ourselves through the storms and tempests that lash every once in a while threatening to blow us away.

What sustains us is the thought expressed so evocatively in Rock Edict XII of our great Emperor Asoka, who ruled in the third century BC over a territory that extended well-beyond present-day India. This edict is in a region of Gujarat and its words resonate even today: I quote,

The faiths of all deserve to be honoured for one reason or another. By honouring them one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others. By acting otherwise, one injures one's own faith and does disservice to that of others. (unquote)

Thank You.