

***“How to dispel mistrust between majority community and minorities-the need for Confidence Building Measures”***

I am deeply grateful to Shri Mohammed Shafi Qureshi, Chairperson of the National Commission for Minorities for doing me the honour to speak on the occasion of the NCM Day on the very vital issue confronting this nation, namely 'How to dispel mistrust between majority community and minorities – the need for Confidence Building Measures'. I deem it a special privilege to address this august gathering. The NCM deserves to be congratulated for their initiative. I do think every effort needs to be made in this direction.

Every religion advocates peace and its believers look for a peaceful environment to live a life of happiness. This is why every religion and every civilization across the globe have condemned bigotry which is responsible for creating conflicts between religions and believers of different faiths. Faiths and Civilization are intended to civilize human-beings and prevent discord. That is why I strongly reject Huntington's idea of conflict of civilizations. In fact, to be fair to him, he later explained his theory which in effect diluted his initial statement. But let the likes of Huntington conjure conflicts but let us preach and teach how to love God's 'gift of culture' with which we are endowed.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, in his celebrated work, the Discovery of India, spoke of 'Unity in Diversity' to explain the essence of Indian civilization. Even though every human-being across the globe strives for peace and security, unfortunately certain political groups advocate one nation and one culture brush aside Nehru's idea as a mere slogan not realizing its historical and cross cultural value. They tend to overlook the historical fact that since centuries India has been a pluralistic society with the Hindus in the majority but not a monolithic society. The Indian society has been a pluralistic society with different religious denominations intricately intertwined to be a model of pluralism to the world. Over the years India has been host to peoples belonging to different faiths and cultures. These peoples have been influenced by Indian culture and they in turn have influenced India's culture. This blending of cultures has, over a period of time, enriched Indian culture. No civilization can flourish in

isolation; it is an on-going process and can never remain encapsulated or be kept in captivity, if must be allowed to flourish. Eric Woolf says it can not be regarded as an 'archipelago of cultures'. Swami Vivekanand, the great philosopher and thinker, considered Indian's pluralism as a 'gift' to the world. Therefore, those who attempt to wish away Nehru's idea of Unity in Diversity as a mere hollow slogan, only prove themselves ignorant of the essence of Indian culture and history.

Culturally speaking, India has had a great past, and Indian culture continues to be a living force. The energy it had generated in the past and continues to generate has impacted other cultures in the Asian belt, it too has benefited from inter-action with other cultures. Gurudev Tagore, the authentic voice of Indian civilization, once remarked that his family was the product of three different cultures, the Hindu, the Muslim and the British. I too can make the same claim.

This composite cultural ethos which in the past greatly influenced our society in writ large in the various provisions of our Constitution. Therefore, the underlying purpose and objective of this Convention, in a manner of speaking, does honour to the precursors of the Asian renaissance, such as Swami Vivekannad, Mahavir, Budha, philosophers and Poets Kalidas, Gurudev Tagore, Mirza Galib and Mohammad Iqbal, to mention a few, from whose teaching and contributions we must learn and move forward. We need to set in motion a process of mutual understanding, trust and accommodation to foster in harmony and peace. As Alfred Whitehead put it, 'the divisive moment when man progressed from barbarity to civilization is when man moved from use of force to reliance on the use of persuasion'. The decisive moment came when man moved from force to persuasion to resolve differences, when might of arms was replaced by the arsenal of rational dialogue.

Our contemporary world is polluted by violent conflicts. Violence is taken as a means to resolve complex issues confronting the humankind. Clouds of hostility, distrust and mistrust are kept simmering around us for political gains. A large number of people are killed year after year in collective violence in one corner of the country or another. Conflicts and turmoil's among people have

surfaced from time to time around issues of culture, religion, caste and ethnicity leaving the society fractured and in perpetual disharmony. This naturally leaves deep scars which heal on the surface with the passage of time but burst open upon the slightest provocation. Conflict and turmoil among peoples are not of recent vintage, but when they are between citizens of the same country based on race, caste or religion, they are essentially on account of lack of will to govern and very often rage furiously when the instigators have sensed this weakness. It is indeed unfortunate when government permits impunity in the name of preventing large scale violence. If such elements masquerading as culture-vigilantes breach cultural harmony by resorting to violence, sanguine in the belief that no action will be taken by the powers that be, impunity is bound to thrive. The State needs to act and act firmly to send a clear message to such elements that enough is enough. Civil society must also raise its voice; in fact it should become the voice of the voiceless. The fact that we who belong to different religious denominations have assembled here kindles a ray of hope and is proof that redemption is alive in human hearts.

India, unfortunately, has been a victim of violence based on religious or cultural conflicts ever since the seeds were sown of the divide and rule policy of the colonial rulers. Unless we are able to rid ourselves of hat and overcome the feeling of distrust and mistrust, i.e. remove this disease from the system, the boil will erupt every not and then and no amount of dressing will rid the system of the disease. However, the hope for redemption must remain kindled and as a single candle spreads light in a dark hall, so also we must ensure this gathering will play the role of that candle. The feeling of hostility among Hindus and Muslims, among Hindus and Christians, in our country is, to my mind, rooted in lack of trust and understanding emanating from the baggage of colonial times and also generated by some domestic forces in recent times. To remove the mistrust and misunderstanding between peoples of different faiths, castes and ethnic groups we must adopt the civilized method of dialogue and not hostility. That is why discussions at such meets assume importance.

Unless immediate remedial action is taken to negative this attitude, the consequences may be a long-drawn conflict-scenario. Fortunately, it was soon

realized that a dialogue between civilizations, religions and cultures was of immediate need to restore the fractured social order and to bring about multi-cultural and multi-religious understanding, perhaps the only basis for a long term security and lasting global peace. The time has come to readjust our notions of traditions and culture in the context of each other's religious practices without sacrificing its purity. That may be a global requirement but our immediate need is to focus on our domestic problems.

In India, by and large, people of all faiths, castes and communities desire to live in peace. To a large body of our masses the priority is to earn livelihood for the family and enjoy life without unnecessary anxieties. Their concern is to educate their children and live in a harmonious and secure environment. Who likes to live in a disturbed and insecure atmosphere? Therefore there can not be a discord between people to people unless seeds are sown by some mischievous elements for personal or political gains. Riot Commissions have over the years since independence pointed out that largely riots are engineered for political gains. It is the politician who converts a mole into a mountain through its lumpen elements and where in power it happens with the assistance of the governmental machinery. Therefore, while it may be a good idea to generate an interfaith dialogue between people of different faiths, the more important issue is how civil society should ensure that political elements do not exploit the situation; do not turn a mole into a mountain for their selfish gains. I think one way is that a body such as this Commission should create peace committees in every State, if necessary fund them, and ensure that before politicians jump into the fray the civil society should take charge and ensure that the situation does not deteriorate. In order to remain relevant and effective, the civil society should remain in constant touch with issues concerning the local people. This will make it difficult for the political elements to take charge of the situation and exploit it.

We live in a democracy and vouchsafe by the rule of law, we promised through our constitution equity, justice and mutual respect, a culture of accommodation and harmony, equal opportunity to all our citizens, freedom of conscience and religion and a durable relationship and promise to the minorities of equal opportunity in the affair of the state. The Sachar Committee Reports

clearly brings out that in the last 60 years since independence the Muslim minority has not received the fruits of freedom. There is unfortunately, in a certain political party, a tendency that the moment any affirmative action is taken by the present government for doing justice to the Muslims, it raises the scarecrow antenna of 'appeasement' or 'vote bank politics' as if, Muslims who have been found to be worst-off than even some Scheduled Caste people are not entitled any such benefit. It is a sheer communal agenda and whenever there is the slightest opportunity or possibility to flare up communal passions, it jumps into the fray. It is such behavior which the civil society and secular forces must strongly counter to nip it in the bud.

We need to be extra vigilant to ensure that our young minds in educational institutions are fed on positive aspects of different faith and not on distorted history or matters that preach violence. Many educationists believe that proper and adequate emphasis has not been laid on moral and cultural aspects in school curriculums. For example, Lord Mahavir emphasizes *ahimsa* and preaches forgiveness *michhami dukram*, the Bhagwat Gita lays emphasis on the need for emancipation of *jiva*, the Quran teaches to be just, honest in dealings with others and patient in times of adversities. Why have we departed from these values?

While revolutionary developments in the field of communication and transport coupled with knowledge-explosion have virtually reduced geographical boundaries as mere lines on the world-map, it has failed to bridge the economic inequalities. We are living in a world which is now described as a global village. Undoubtedly the world is shrinking due to the advance of technology which has ushered in an unprecedented pace and scale of change; at the same time it has created a sort of disorientation and problems of adaptation. Some scholars and social commentators have described it as 'time-space compression'. Meaning thereby the shrinkage of space and the shortening of time caused by accelerated pace of life. While a great deal of hype and euphoria is generated we can not forget its paradoxical consequences in an economically unequal world since it can have both positive as well as negative dysfunctional consequences, particularly in countries with a large section of people living in abject poverty,

such as India. Poverty, very often, is the cause for social unrest and every effort must be made to bridge the gap between the haves and the have nots.

With the advance of telecommunication and relative ease of movement, there is on the one hand free flow of ideas and on the other increased travel facilities making societies more and more pluralistic across the globe. Countries with deeply religious societies, such as India, have to face challenges, sometimes grave, since such societies have their share of fanatics and obscurantist who are hell bent on using religion as an instrumentality to divide the society, spread hatred and indulge in violence. India must face this challenge with grit and determination and not allow such elements to succeed. In fact it must take the lead to show to the world how to foster inter-faith and inter-cultural amity through dialogue. Through regular inter-faith dialogues alone we can prevent such elements from spreading hatred in society in the name of religion. It needs a three-pronged approach, (i) regular inter-faith dialogue, (ii) civil society initiative and (iii) a strong governmental will to nip such endeavors in the bud. We need to awaken the secular forces from their slumber to contain the malafide designs of communal forces, or else our democracy and freedoms will be in jeopardized.

I am therefore glad that the NCM has taken this initiative and extend my hearties congratulations to the commission in general and to its Chairperson Mr. Qureshi in particular. Once again I thank the organizers for their kindness in inviting me to speak to this august gathering and, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your time and patience in hearing me.

Jai Hind.

