

The Idea of India: Speech 24th June 2014

Taking India Forward : The Road Ahead; Democracy, Secularism and Social Cohesion.

The heritage of India's multi-religious, multilingual and multi-racial diversity, its inclusiveness has forged through centuries. For centuries India has provided a home to very significant number of practitioners of practically every other major religion of the world, be it Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism or the Baha'ism. India is the birthplace of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism .

This assimilation and accommodation of diversity has contributed to the richness of its composite culture and durability of its civilization. It is this intrinsic unity, integrity and harmony that enabled India to fight against the British might as one force for the cause of freedom. There were many languages, many cultures, many religions but one voice. And it is this unique inherent unity that is the cornerstone to growth of India's success. And it is this inherent Unity that will take India Forward.

There is the lurking dark shadow of violence besieges the country targeting innocent people. Terrorism, the most heinous of crimes needs to be uprooted. Terrorism and Violence are to be absolutely condemned. The security and safety of the country are not negotiable. Terrorism has no religion or boundary and must be dealt with severely. Its perpetrators need to be brought to books. Strong action has to taken against them. Strict laws dealing with those who take the life of innocents must be enacted. Neighboring countries harboring terrorists need to be counseled. The shocking abduction of the Christian priest in Herat by Taliban extremists needs to be condemned. The simmering situation in Iraq is alarming with 40 Indians, as reported, held up in the country, by militants is a matter of anxiety.

The powerful idea of India stretching across half a century in the midst of spectacular and often turbulent events is the existence of its strong secular, democratic, pluralist fabric. To hold the high moral ground, weeding out constricted elements for India's march into the future, is crucial. In order to restore a more sensitized focus within communities, progressive secular organizations can breathe fresh life by concentrating on national integration, assimilation and social cohesion. Tolerance is an integral part of our system. It entails not only tolerance of those who agree with us but also of those who do not agree with us.

Notwithstanding the blinkered "divide and rule" policy of the British Raj closely followed by political parties in India to gain political mileage, Indians understand the importance of building alliances among religions, cultures and ethnic groups . It considers liberal democracy, secularism and

successful pluralism as being grounded on the basic tenets of mutual understanding and respect for diverse traditions.

The question is that despite the secular and religious tolerance ingrained in the Constitution of India, sporadic and sometimes serious acts of religious violence tend to occur as the root causes of religious violence .

Muzzafarnagar is a recent example. Christians, Sikhs and other caste and ethnic minorities also suffer likewise.

Even its critics submit, that India has taken great strides since it achieved Independence more than 65 years ago. Economic growth since 1980 has been among the fastest in the world ; social indicators for literacy, education enrollment , disease and mortality , and gender have steadily improved. The Economic Survey of India report 203-2014 that the State of Maharashtra,s income has increased at the average rate of 13.8 per cent. While distinguished Mrs Sonia Gandhi leads the Congress Party , Mrs Sumita Mahajan as the Second lady Speaker in Parliament in the BJP Government. The new Government also has inducted six ladies the Cabinet. They are considering to enact the Women Empowerment Bill giving women 33% seats to women in Parliament . That would be very commendable.

Paradoxically on the other hand, Crime against women in the same State (generally) has increased. In 2012 crimes against women have gone up to 17,800 which include serious crimes like rape, kidnapping, abduction, dowry deaths and immoral trafficking according to the Economic Survey Report 2012-2-13 that was tabled in the State Legislature on Wednesday 3rd. June 2014.

In this connection, to ensure for the safety and security of its citizens, Passing of a strong Prevention of Communal and Targeted Violence Bill in Parliament (Access to Justice and Reparations) is an imperative.

To respect, protect and fulfill the right to equality before the law and equal protection of law by imposing duties on the Central Government and the State Governments, to exercise their powers in an impartial and non-discriminatory manner to prevent and control targeted violence, including mass violence, against Women, Children, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Linguistic Minorities Religious and Ethnic Minorities , or any marginalized community in any State in the Union of India, and linguistic minorities in any State in the Union of India; to thereby uphold secular democracy; to help secure fair and equal access to justice and protection to these vulnerable groups through effective provisions for investigation, prosecution and trial of offences under the Act; to provide for restorative relief and reparation, including rehabilitation and compensation to all persons affected by communal and targeted violence; and for matters connected herewith and incidental thereto.

India's electorate has rising aspirations as witnessed in the last elections. They have asked for positive change. Democracy is not simply electoral mathematics. Claims to egalitarian values owe allegiance to civil rights, freedom of conscience, liberties, rule of law, a free press, a strong judiciary and constitutional governance are embedded in the bedrock of Indian democracy.

Undoubtedly, TAKING INDIA FORWARD through a corruption free nation, economic prosperity, scientific advancement are imperatives. Good governance, education, development, infrastructure , transparency , economic success and growth fundamental and have no parallels. Nonetheless, recognizing affirmative action by enlarging areas of socio-economic inclusion, equal opportunities and jobs for all its citizens, peace and humanism are an indispensable part of democratic ideals .

Marginalization of communities reduces and capitulates the productivity of the Nation. All Indians must energize themselves their abilities to release positive energies to gain a vantage point in growth and development of the Nation. Participation in Nation building is a prerogative and duty of every Indian citizen. Transformation of India's socio-economic political landscape can be achieved when its citizens stand hand in hand contributing to its glorious future. Together we can take India to the heights of unprecedented success.

The challenge before us is to fire the imagination and reignite the light that brought us together in our freedom struggle for "azadi" where religions, cultures, class and caste joined hands and spoke as a single entity. That was a defining moment in the history of our nation.

It must be made clear that the struggle to safeguard secular democracy in India, the struggle against communalism cannot be countered by other forms of extremisms. The only way to preserve and strengthen India's secular democracy will have to be through forging strong common bonds amongst peoples cutting across social-cultural-religions and other diversities.

Social media cannot be used to fan hatred. There is need to counter accepted intolerance and create stringent laws to halt and make punishable hate literature, emails, through print electronic, writing is necessary. The Reported brutal death on June 4th 2014 of "a youth from the Minority Community in cold blood, without any reason or provocation" is equally chilling.

On Saturday 16th December while being presented with India's 25 greatest Global Indian living legends Award by the hands of our Hon'ble President, Shri Parnab Mukherji at the prestigious Rashtrapati Bhavan, the illustrated

Ila Bhatt in her acceptance speech said “Poverty is violence with the approval of society”. She also spoke of a tolerant society where cultures and sub-cultures can co-exist where faiths and sub faiths can co-exist. Monocultures and standardization are not life-giving forces. Interdependence binds us closely.

On the same day, Dr Amayata Sen spoke of India’s food security crisis as being a reality. “The future belongs to nations with grains not guns,” he said in his acceptance speech.

On the same occasion Vikram Sheth said “accepted intolerance is violence with the acquiescence of society. Basically there is no point in wrapping yourself in a flag when you do not realize that the flag has more than one component. There are different colors in it, they mean different things and in the heart of it is a wheel.... The wheel of justice, the recycle of life, the wheel of law....” 9

The days of coalition politics seem to be over. The success of a Party winning an election with such a huge margin is phenomenal and unprecedented in the history of India. The people of India, including Minorities have vested their trust in them and contributed to its success. We congratulate the Government and wish it all success to fulfill the aspiration of the Indian people. They have made an impact on foreign policy by holding an olive branch to all its immediate neighbors in a call for peace and prosperity. We congratulate them.

The People of India have asked for change. Then, as Gandhiji has said “We must be the change we wish to see in the world. And we, the people of India must have confidence in ourselves. We need a quintessential, qualitative change. The politics of “majorityism” has never India’s mantra. Leadership rests in trusteeship and benevolence. India is a land of equal opportunity, of cultural bloom, of fusion and synthesis for all its citizens. As Chairman Mao Tse-Tung in a speech in 1957 welcoming the Chinese intelligentsia to a conference in which he invited open criticism of the regime said "Letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend is the policy for promoting progress in the arts and the sciences and a flourishing socialist culture in our land." Such diversity of thought, he said, was the only way to further art, politics and science.

“Taking India Forward : The Road Ahead ; Democracy, Secularism And Social Cohesion” seeks solutions. It weaves around the some of the challenges facing the idea of India : cultural exclusivism, communalism and its dilemmas .

To bring transformation India one must look for solutions to the woes of today. Mere criticism and cynicism is an incentive but by itself not the answer. The Prophets of doom must be dismissed. To take India Forward We need to rejuvenate the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. To take India Forward

we need Vasudeva Kutumbakum or the world is a family and Sarva Dharma Sambhava or equal regard for all religions.

As the Sufi saint Maulana Rumi said , But the names differ, Beloved; All in truth are only one; In the sea wave and the Bubble lies the luster of one Sun.

Zeenat Shaukat Ali, Director General, The Wisdom Foundation.

Zeenat Shaukat Ali

Director General, The Wisdom Foundation