



Government of NCT of Delhi



प्रवासी भारतीय कार्य मंत्रालय
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Confederation of Indian Industry



**8TH Pravasi
Bharatiya Divas**

Engaging the Diaspora: the way forward

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भारतीय दिवस**

दृष्टिगतता की राह पर बढ़ते कदम

7-9 January 2010, Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi

Speech by the Chief Guest
Lord Khalid Hameed
CBE DL Hampstead



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Mr. Prime Minister, Mr Vayalar Ravi, Honourable Smt Sheila Dikshit, Mr Srinivasan, Dr Didar Singh, My Lords, Excellencies, distinguished ladies and gentlemen. For me it is a unique honour to address this august gathering celebrating the presence around the world of Indians settled abroad who act as the unofficial ambassadors for this country and who are gathered here today to celebrate and rejoice in the growth and development of this great nation which can be especially proud of its pluralistic society, its democracy and its secularism.

1. When I was thinking of what I should say to you this morning about India which has harboured and welcomed every faith on this planet, what seemed appropriate to talk to you about – interfaith dialogue, which I consider most pertinent in our troubled times for India and the rest of the world.
2. One of the most divisive elements through centuries of human history to our present day is religion. This was not meant to be so; but extremists in many faiths are bent upon exploiting religion for their own nefarious, political agendas.
3. As we know, religion can be a force for peace or war; it can heal or hurt. It can create or destroy on a scale unimaginable to previous generations. Human history is filled with episodes involved with religion, of misguided believers responsible for the slaughter of fellow humans on the altar of religion.
4. Though L & G there is warmth and friendship here this morning, there is also much fear and hatred outside in the world. Yet we cannot be discouraged. There is enough commonality in world religions to enable us to reach out to our fellow humans.
5. L and G, humans have demonstrated their genius for creativity. However, despite our glorious achievements, we have lost none of our ability to destroy and kill fellow humans with impunity.



6. When extremists inflict violence on society in the name of 'religion' it is often the innocent who are their main victims. This must be resisted by the community at large. Voices must be raised in protest. We must withhold the robe of sanctity when it is sought as a cloak for violence and bloodshed, even if the perpetrators are from our own faith.
7. A famous politician once observed that if we were to wake up one morning to find that we were all the same race, religion and nationality, we would still find some other reason to hate each other by the afternoon. How sad. Is human nature indeed that dark?
8. Of late, our society has become increasingly concerned for our physical security from the threat of extremists and terrorists. Attention has been particularly focused in the direction of the radical elements from the followers of Islam from where mainly, the recent atrocities have come. To prevent our world from moving from one crisis to another, we need to re-assess the relationship between Islam and others. As human beings, we are all more alike than different, irrespective of our physical make-up and self-created labels, which might suggest otherwise. The challenge before us is to respect value and understand others without comprising the bedrock of our own faith.
9. One of the challenges of our time – as we set out at the beginning of the 21st century – is whether modern people living in both Islamic and other cultures can co-exist on this planet.
10. It is important therefore to understand Islam post 9/11 and 11/26. The perpetrators of these crimes against humanity not only killed many innocent people, but also created a great paradox for Islam, which sees itself as a religion of peace and is now associated with murder and mayhem.



11. However, L & G, Islam prohibits not only the killing of the innocent, but is also most severe on the act of suicide. There is a clear Quranic instruction against taking one's own life. Therefore let me say it clearly for all to hear that exploding bombs and firing bullets with an act of suicide to kill innocent people in buses, bazaars, planes, trains, schools, places of worship or anywhere else, is totally un-Islamic and against the teachings of the Quran. All Muslims therefore must do all they can stop this evil depravity.

12. The accepted teachings of Islam which have prevailed throughout the centuries are based on the belief in piece and compassion. It is appropriate to say that terrorists are evil, regardless of what religion they belong to. In today's world each community and continent is faced with this problem in some shape or form. The terrorists are a tiny minority. The majority of the world, including Muslims condemns them.

13. Let me give you a glaring example of how selective our principal source of information, the media, can be. One of the most venerated and respected figures of the Islamic world Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al Sheikh is the Grant Mufti of Saudi Arabia where the most holy sites for Islam are based. A few weeks ago he delivered the annual Hajj sermon for the annul pilgrimage where nearly 2 million Muslims were gathered. There, with many in the Muslim world listening, he underscored the true teachings of Islam for ultimate success in this world and the hereafter through peace and harmony and he declared that Islam had nothing to do with terrorism and extremism and urged the Muslims to unite against the incidents of suicide bombings, etc. This is a recipe for Hell rather than a place in Paradise.

It is my sincere wish that our wonderful media world-wide would have given more prominence to such a message rather than the drip drab that we see in newspapers every day which only leads to the poisoning of our minds against each other.



14. Here in India, we must fully participate and celebrate in a thriving democratic, secular and multi-cultural society with different faiths living peacefully together side by side. Let us make sure that the silent majority amongst all faiths will stand up and be counted and that our voice is heard loud and clear that any effort by the extremists to hide their criminal intent under the mask of religious piety is categorically denied to them and unequivocally rejected by the community as a whole.

Can I therefore, as a Muslim recognise God's image in a stranger who is not a fellow Muslim? That is, can I see God's image in a Hindu, in a Sikh or in a Christian or Jew? Islam tackles this confusion by saying to the Muslims in the Quran to respect all of God's creation regardless of religion or method of worship:

“ Oh you men - we have created you male and female and I have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another. So, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the best for conduct” (Surah 49:13)

Other faiths have similar advice when faced with some of the same problems with strangers. The Hebrew part of the Bible commands:

“When a stranger lives with you in your land, do not ill-treat him. A stranger who lives with you should be treated like a native born. Love him as yourself for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God”

From the ancient Hindu scriptures Subha Shitim comes this advice:

“This man is ours, that man is a stranger. Discrimination of this kind is found only amongst mean-minded people. Those who are noble, to them the whole world is one family.”

A great teacher and leader of the Sikh religion, Guru Gobind Singh, taught the communality of religions and the oneness of God. He mentioned that the



Ram of the Hindus and the Rahim of the Muslims were ONE. The various scriptures of the main religions of the world points to the oneness of God. From the Christian faith the instructions in this context is very clear of “Love thy neighbour”. And the Zoroastrian and Buddhist faiths talk of “The brotherhood of man”.

15. My time as Chairman of the Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council has convinced me that a very important component in our strategic thinking for our future harmony should be a partnership with young people of today - who will be the guardians of our civilized world tomorrow. My message to youth attracted to violence and aggression, is to reject extremism which robs them of education and responsible citizenship and points them in the direction of violence and self-destruction. Whatever hardship and discrimination some of these young people experience, it is worth reminding how precious their human rights are with the freedom to practice their faith in a democratic India which seeks to uphold the rights of all its citizens. We must invite these young people to join in the mainstream of the life of this nation and fully participate with enthusiasm and then demand the rewards, which will surely come their way.
16. Interfaith dialogue is the only way forward to addressing differences amongst faiths. This dialogue is no longer a luxury of a few well-meaning individuals, it has become a necessity in demanding action without which only catastrophe stares us in the face.
17. Amongst the teachings of the Hindu religions there is especially one prayer from the Atharva Vedas coming down from thousands of years which I would like to share with you. Its English translation from Sanskrit goes like this:



**We are birds of the same nest
We may wear different skins
We may speak different languages
We may believe in different religions
We may belong to different cultures
Yet we share the same home - our Earth**

18. Finally, taking time to be friends is an investment, not least because it establishes a climate to modify one's set views and those of others. The effort on the part of any one individual in this cause may well be perceived as a 'drop in a bucket', but many drops, when added together, could make a big difference to the emptiness of that bucket.

Distinguished, L & G, I invite your participation to bring the prayer from the Vedas to fruition.