

INDIA - ITS DIVERSITY AND FUTURE

**SHAHEED NANAK SINGH MEMORIAL LECTURE
PUNJABIUNIVERSITY, PATIALA
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I feel greatly honored being here to deliver the Fourth Shaheed Nanak Singh Memorial lecture. For this invitation, I sincerely thank the Directors of Shaheed Sardar Nanak Singh Foundation and the University authorities.

Sardar Nanak Singh ji was a science graduate with a law degree who gave up a career in the Police and joined the Bar to serve the national cause. He became the leading human rights activist of his province and fearlessly defended the soldiers of Azad Hind, for which he suffered reprisals. He believed in the unity of the country and was opposed to partition. A spirited and dedicated citizen, he made the supreme sacrifice for a noble cause. While trying to save students who had organized a peace march against the division of the country in Multan, he was done to death. A worthy citizen with a worthy name, he sacrificed his life for a worthy cause. Today,

while paying my humble tribute to the memory of this great man, I have chosen to speak on India, its diversity and future...

The subject here is no less than an ocean. You can well understand my plight, when the audience is of learned women and men. Before me are scholars and students, and the place is a university, a great temple of learning. Let me confess that when the topic was picked up, the enormous challenge it carried did not dawn upon me – that I have to deal with a topic that is heavy enough for a postgraduate dissertation, roughly in about half an hour's time or a little more! So, in the beginning itself, let me seek your cooperation and confidence and also pray for the blessings of the Almighty Wahe Guru ji and Sardar Nanak Singh ji.

Development of a society or a nation depends on variables like the social structure, the nature of people, their behaviour and their value system. India is a land of contrasts; every day one can find stories of both hope and despair, good and bad. India has assimilated multi-ethnic migrants into its fold during its long period of evolution, giving rise to diversities. Governance of a

pluralistic society like India is a sensitive and challenging exercise. India comprises people of different ethnic, religious, caste, linguistic and regional identities. While these identities co-existed for centuries and presented a mosaic culture, there have been periods of discord. The diversity makes the divide easy too. We cannot ignore that diversity:

- stimulates an open, robust and creative exchange of ideas
- imparts invaluable education and social benefits
- increases cross-cultural competency
- gives us the advantage of being able to understand how others think and function
- gives us the skills to cross racial divides

Distinction comes when one surpasses the thus far known and set standards - be it of life, profession, or anything else. When one identifies oneself with others and lives for the cause of others, he or she becomes the one loved, regarded and respected by the society. In the annals of history, such people have an elevated place, carved out by their deeds, but maintained by time and remembered by others. Fame follows them and not *vice versa*. For them, fame is an unwanted decor, and fear, an unknown entity. For those who

covet everything and fear anything, they will always inspire awe.

The more we respect and remember them, the more we are prone to be cured of the said maladies.

Sardar Nanak Singh ji was born in a deeply religious family, brought up as per the Sikh tradition, and named after the founder of the Sikh Faith, whose true missionary he remained ever. For Guru Nanak Dev ji, the major evil the Indian Society was afflicted with and that hindered India's unity and progress, appeared to be her caste system. Both in his private and public life Sardar Nanak Singh ji closely followed the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev ji who sought to mould the then social order into a democratic setup based on justice, liberty, equality, and brotherhood. His last speech which he delivered a day before his assassination carried an implicit reference to Guru Nanak Dev ji's repudiation of the doctrine that 'religion and economic interests are two separate and coordinate kingdoms' and reiteration of his philosophy that the economic environment within which the individuals function must have a scale of values derived from theology which can moderate the ceaseless desire for

pecuniary gain in a materialistic society. Despite lucrative temptations, he chose the path of truth and non-violence. Sardar Nanak Singh ji was a brave police officer and a lawyer; a man of matchless conviction and courage. While others feared, he brazenly advocated a united India. Caste, creed, and religion did not find place in his scheme of thought or life. He treated everyone alike – saw all through the prism of human soul. It was Sardar Nanak Singh ji's devotion to care for another human being that led to his death at the age of 43. He laid down his life to save innocent children from the frenzy of a fanatic mob. By respecting and remembering Sardar Nanak Singh ji, we are not doing any favour either to him, to his family or memory, but we are doing a duty which we owe unto ourselves as his brethren and fellow beings. There might have been many, who sacrificed their life and belongings for the sake of others. The message from such sacrifices attains more relevance today, when our contemporary socio-political psyche stands at the crossroads of time and asks whether it should move towards a liberated plain of compassion and tolerance, making us capable of doing bigger and better things keeping our

cultural and historic legacy flying high, or subject itself to following the route which leads to a kind of sectarian survival which accords importance and owes allegiance only to one's own beliefs, group and religion which promote hatred and violence, and nothing else.

Sardar Nanak Singh ji's children were brought up and educated well, despite the hardship caused by his untimely departure.

Today's modern mothers must salute Sardarni Harbans Kaur ji, for rearing eight children with matchless dedication and care. That is sublime parenting and motherhood. Five of them are in the service of the nation, in the armed forces. Their father in heaven must be happy and proud that they all revere and remember him and set apart resources and time to honour India. Only from a true and proud patriot can come an equally proud progeny of patriots. My special thanks are due to Mr. Rami Ranger, the youngest child of Nanak Singh ji, for conferring the honour of delivering this lecture. He was skeptical whether I would make it, which now stands dispelled. May God bless them all to continue their father's legacy.

The people of India welcomed liberalism on January 26, 1950. The Republic, in some ways, broke with the 19th century liberalism wherein autonomy of the individual alone was considered the best way to protect and preserve diversity and resist discrimination. Those who framed our Constitution were aware of the reality that protecting the autonomy of the 'self,' might not ensure religious tolerance and diversity. They could visualize the wonderful mosaic of India's racial, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity. The orthodoxy of 19th century liberalism was not an amenable feature for a people who had decided to carry out one of the greatest and perhaps the most exciting experiments of the civilized world - the experiment of fostering diversity and amalgamating it into an ethos that is uniquely Indian and creating a unity out of that. Here the nation state could emerge intact, suffused with a beauty not thus far seen in the democratic world. This is our self. This is the dream every Indian eye should behold, every Indian heart should throb for, assimilate and realize. As we stand today at the crossroads, we must not let this slide into oblivion. We must be in tune with the

moment and realize the destiny of India – an energetic and awakened nation that is heard loud and seen clear.

We pass through a painful time, despite all the progress and developments we have made so far. While yesterday's wounds pain us, we are also scared and pensive about our tomorrows. An ordinary citizen of this country today remains frightened. His mind is filled with unexplainable, rational and irrational fears. Fear not only of external threats, but that of internal as well. You cannot predict when your next door neighbor will turn extremely aggressive on you for no fault of yours. In the forties, it was the fear whether we would win freedom or not. Now, even after independence, we are in the grip of a kind of fear psychosis. This individual insecurity is created by the present social and political ill. To cure all these ills, the entire citizenry will have to understand what India is and what her heritage and culture are, and how powerful they are. While keeping abreast of technological advancements, we should not forget the great teachings we inherited. India withstood many calamities and passed through

many troubled times. Each of us has to understand her diversity, her beauty and strength as well. While I was making notes for this lecture, I came across a news report on December 28 that one had to pay with his life just for making a scratch on a car. The door of the victim's car brushed against another car while alighting, which led to a brief altercation with the two in the second vehicle. One of them drew a gun and finished the 'offender.' We are becoming anger-driven. The damage would have cost few hundred or thousand rupees, but what went off was a human life with just a bullet, triggered by a foolish spur. Had he understood the meaning of "***Sabmeh (i) jot(i) h-eisoe; Tis d-eichaanah(i) sabh meh(i) chaanh(u) hoe***" – "*It is the same spirit that pervades all and His light illumines every being,*" or been taught it, he would not have pulled the trigger against his fellow being howsoever bad was the damage to the car. Instances like this are many. We are becoming less tolerant and least forgiving. If we understand the true and full meaning of the above words, we would not even raise our voice against another being. Why should one learn and follow these, when crimes are tastier and easy? Anger

began in folly will end in repentance. The fire you kindle for your enemy will burn yourself.

We have spiritual diversity, but with a better unity. Each religion has its own ways and traditions. Yet, the wonderful mosaic called India holds all together. Our diversity comprise geographical, social, political, ethnic, etc. Multi-ethnic migrants came to India in waves. In due course of time, they assimilated into Indian Society as its integral parts. They were allowed to preserve their distinct dialects, beliefs, and values, customs and traditions etc., which are intact even today. However, their assimilation resulted mainly in linguistic, occupational and cultural diversities. To travel into the inroads of our religious domains, the time prescribed here is too little, even for a bare peep. Yet, one must admit that the Indian perspective viewed humanity as one. From our *Upanisads*, we can find that there is only one God, a supreme power. It is just a power, with no shape and colour. It is the *Onkar*. It is complete; anything about it is complete. The invocation in the *Isa Upanisad* says “*That is full, this is full. The full comes out of the full. Taking the*

full from the full, the full itself remains.” The *Ek Onkar* is that. It is full, eternal and final.

Today, standing here, my university days unroll in my thoughts. No doubt, universities are centres of higher learning. As regards University, I remember the words of Lord Byron, about Cambridge University, that: ***“This place is the Devil, or at least his principal residence, they call it the University, but any other appellation would have suited it much better, for study is the last pursuit of society; the Master eats, drinks, and sleeps, the Fellows drink, dispute and pun, the employments of the undergraduates you will probably conjecture without my description.”*** Let us leave that there, as a timely compliment from one of the great poets to a great university!

One has to see the university as a futuristic institution that makes innovative uses of the past. It is a miniaturized embodiment of the dualisms of society, a creative rostrum where tensions of the society are played well. It is a source of tension and creativity. As it

is liminal in character, the oppositions it generate range from excellence versus relevance, assimilation versus diversity, individual versus community and freedom versus social responsibility. It cannot be seen as a standard problem-solving forum. It is much beyond that. It renders democracy its creative power as an entity which sees knowledge as the sum total of human excellence. Here, the citizen is a man of knowledge, not a buyer, seller or consumer. From this solid ethos the liberal democracy gets its creative power. Here Shakespeare and Cervantes, Ghalib and Kalidas, Newton and Panini, Marx and Manu, Nanak and Christ rub shoulders in an easy ambience. Nalanda was ‘the meeting ground of different sects and creeds with their possible and impossible doctrines.’ To be secular does not mean to be religiously illiterate.

It is worthwhile to remember the words of our former President S. Radhakrishnan, who said in his report on education in 1950 that *“the universities as the makers of the future cannot persist in the old patterns, however valid they may have been in their own day.”*

No doubt, this will remain true for ever. We cannot blame this report if it had seen the university as a means to realize the goals of our constitution which primarily envisages justice. Though borrowed from the French Revolution, the triangular crest of equality, fraternity and liberty is worth retaining and pursuing, for these inter-dependent basic elements have no substitutes.

Individual freedom becomes the 'idle curiosity' of the scholar, and liberty the autonomy of the university to pursue knowledge without external interference. It has to creatively teach the art of dissenting and positively nurse a strong dissenting academia. Higher education is undoubtedly an obligation of the State. However, State aid should not be confused with State control. If it becomes so, the liberty will lose its salt and charm.

We must, therefore, in the interest of our own democracy, work towards a system that is progressive in approach, technologically sound, globally competitive and truly rooted in our culture and ethos as well. Liberalization of education is here. The State alone cannot aid higher education and therefore, privatization has

become unavoidable. Here, the regulatory control is necessary to ensure quality – quality of content and delivery. The idea of private-public partnership is quite relevant in respect of higher education. It is not lack of funds, but a proper environment in which initiative and enterprise are not stifled by meaningless controls and unhealthy political interferences. Access and equity are important. They can be met by proper regulatory framework including a reward system for excellence. If we do not make innovative uses of the past, we will end up with educated unemployment and unemployable degree holders. We need to be competitive in structure and content. Otherwise, to borrow the words of Lord Byron, it is everybody's conjecture what will happen to our 'undergraduate and graduate employments.' The recent announcement by our present HRD Minister that India will soon have its own Ivy League varsities is a welcome sign. A twelve per cent increase in research papers from India as against the four per cent global growth is quite optimistic. If we do not reform our education sector, our children will be outcast from the universe of knowledge tomorrow.

Our diversity is best reflected in our campuses. Transforming the society by engaging the many divisions, differences and disparities through educational processes happen here. Unfortunately, unity of curricula, I am afraid, is not there. Rather than producing PhDs like a confectionary, the Universities should have a good inner logic and a pluralized model of education. Diversity will flourish then.

One acknowledged reason for the continuing poverty in this country is our poor record in providing basic services like education and healthcare. In 1991, the year the reforms began, only 39 per cent of Indian women could read and write and only 64 per cent of men. Here we lagged behind not only the developed nations, but also some of our neighbours – Sri Lanka and China. Sri Lanka had educated 89 per cent of its women and 94 per cent of its men, while China had the figures at 75 and 96 per cent respectively. The results of 2001 census reveal that there has been an increase in literacy in the country. The literacy rate in the country is 64.84 per cent, 75.26 for males and 53.67 for females. The population of India, which at the turn of the twentieth century

was around 238.4 million, increased to reach 1,028 million at the dawn of the twenty-first century. The population of India as recorded at each decennial census from 1901 has grown steadily except for a decrease during 1911-21. The need to have sound health and educational policies remain predominant. It is heartening that our policies are taking these issues seriously.

The recent Annual Parliamentary Lecture of Professor Jagdish Bhagwati on Indian Reforms underlines that “enhanced growth rate has been good for reducing poverty, while it has not increased inequality measured meaningfully and that large majorities of virtually all underprivileged groups polled say that their financial situation has not worsened and significant numbers say that it has improved.” Transformation of the poor will take place only through enhanced healthcare, quality education, research and development. True, only reforms can help the poor. To do this, we need good governance. When we look at the present corruption breakouts, we will get disheartened. But the fact that they are being exposed one after the other, is a reassuring sign. The remedy

is known - the nexus largely between the new class entrepreneurs, politicians and bureaucrats should be burst. A beginning has to begin. Mahatma Gandhi said “a body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.” We need to accomplish this mission.

Our future looks riddled with difficulties, but not that gloom. The issues of governance, corruption, suicide of farmers, displacement of indigenous people, spiralling price rise, so on and so forth are there, staring us sharply. We will tackle them. Not only we need to use science to eradicate poverty, we should be able to use science to get at corruption as well. The enormous potential of science has to be made known to one and all, and all should learn to apply them. We have to walk away from our superstitions and hypocrisy.

Being associated with law and justice, I must tell you something about it as well. Without proper justice delivery system, no democracy can survive. It is one of the main pillars of democracy. The incidents reported from various parts of the country recently would not only disturb any law-abiding mind but would enrage him

as well. You know, practice of law was considered to be a great profession and judging a duty divine. It must continue to be so. The seat of justice, which is the last refuge of a citizen for justice, and bound to undo injustice, must hold unto itself that any kind of failure on its part, not only will erode democratic values but would hinder human progress as a whole as well. It is the independence of judiciary that restrains the rise of unbridled power. History proves that this independence has protected our democratic values against many odds.

These all are known to everyone and I am not revealing anything new. A university is the best place to scrutinize the social psyche and take care of it. Young minds blossom here and they must understand the value of truth, honesty, integrity etc., and should never let them down. Becoming an IAS officer or President of the country is a possibility and a democratic right. But the way you live is your democratic experience. There is a great distance between the said possibility and your experience. Modern economics says the larger the distance, the more degenerated would be the

country's democratic atmosphere. The living conditions or atmosphere can turn to be 'business-driven.' An atmosphere can be created by a particular interest. Our wants and needs can be controlled by someone else. We need to realize this. Liberty has this meaning also. We are not to live the way someone wants us to. The day is not far, if we ignore the bells, when colas and cakes will replace our '*amrits*' and '*prashads*' even. We should not allow such interferences or invasions to rule us.

We have to be boldly determined that we will change all of it. Union of speech and listening has to be there. To imbibe and inculcate change means to start a revolution on every level. Not a military revolution, but a political revolution, an economic revolution, a cultural revolution, a moral revolution, and above all a spiritual revolution as well. Any transformation without a liberated standard of morality and a high-minded spirituality will be useless and dangerous. To renovate India we need to elevate ourselves morally and spiritually to a higher plain. We need to become highly sensitive to human suffering, our national importance, and our

diversities and heritage. Discordant thoughts or disruptive tendencies should never bud in our mind. It is worthwhile to remember a dialogue in one of Harry Potter movies, which runs like “*progress for the sake of progress must be discouraged; practice what must be practiced, make perfect what must be perfected and prune all that ought to be prohibited.*” Everyone should be at peace with others and himself. All our citizenry should be free from hunger and fear. Every child born here must get education to the highest possible level based on merit. Everyone must understand the meaning and importance of our Constitution. It is not an alien text meant only for interpretation in courts. It is a text to be learnt, understood and respected by every Indian. It was framed on the basis that our citizens, including the best, would be willing to take a continuous and considered part in public life. It speaks of his responsibilities and duties and spells out his rights as well. It is the thread powerful enough to keep us bound. We need the best come into public life. Hence, we need a revolutionized revolution here. We should not be afraid to begin that as a ‘*yagna.*’ And that is my appeal to you.

Man's greed attacks nature and environment and ecology and the wounded Nature is sure to backlash on our future. Remember the words of Wordsworth:

*“The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon.”*

In the end, before concluding, I must admit that I do not fall into the category of scholars with deep learning and broad vision. All I told you now are taken from what had happened around and is happening around us. In our *Upanisad*, an invocation mentions that the speech should be established in mind and mind in speech and one should speak of the right and true and that should protect the speaker. The phrase in Sanskrit is known as “*avatu vaktaram.*” If I have gone wrong on any aspect, while you have the full liberty to correct me, I also recite that prayer that may I be protected by that – “*avatu vaktaram.*”

Thank you.

A.S. Chandhiok