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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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# PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

BY

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In this solemn and sacred hour, when our organisation is meeting for the first time under the flag of a free and independent India, it is our privilege and duty on behalf of ourselves and of students of Indian history in generations yet to come to pay our humble tribute to Mahatma Gandhi and the leaders of the Indian National Congress for their world-historic achievement. This is not a question on which the opinion of well-informed contemporaries can be overthrown by the researches of posterity. At a time when, in an atmosphere of inexpressible gloom, our country was lying helpless under the heel of the foreigner, without self-respect, without vision and without hope, it pleased the Lord to send to us the greatest Indian teacher of all times; and under his divinely inspired guidance we have, after a bloodless struggle of thirty years, liquidated peacefully and by mutual agreement one of the most powerful empires the world has seen. Neither the foreign ruler nor his Indian underling has suffered anything in the process; the wounds and the sufferings have been entirely ours, and ours also the glory of the moral endeavour and accomplishment. No Revolution so pacific and so momentous is found in the history of any land.

But this great achievement, unfortunately, has been accompanied by a great failure and tarnished by a greater disgrace. Soon after the Mutiny, the British Army Commission evolved the formula of "counterpoise of natives against natives"; and this formula was taken up by the civil administration and applied to every sphere, including the subsidisation of pseudo-religious movements, whose main purpose was the creation of friction and bitterness. With the institution of communal electorates, a hideous arrangement which no western democracy would have tolerated for a moment, a political platform was prepared for the perpetuation of communal conflicts. Normally the representatives of a people are by their very position driven to seek the interests of the people as a whole, and the reconciliation of conflicting interests is one of their

primary duties. But the artificial arrangement of communal electorates provided that a representative would be primarily judged not by what he did for the country or even for his community, but by what he did against the rest. The differences of religion, inevitable in a large country like ours, were thus fused into two opposite political groups, and their increasing hostility was inevitable as with each succeeding election, and an expanding body of voters, all representatives were required to appeal exclusively to masses of their own denomination. It was obviously calculated that in this struggle the minority would lean more and more on the foreign power, and try to prove worthy of its support by sabotaging the national movement. So, finally, both east and west of our constitutional, secular and democratic Republic, they have created the Dominion of Pakistan under the pretence that it is a 'Muslim State'. Of the horrors with which this Partition has been accompanied—of the six million people or more uprooted from the homes of their ancestors, of corpses that no one has been able to count, and of crimes seen and credibly reported—this is not the place to speak. But no amount of provocation by the guilty can justify retaliation against those who are perfectly innocent. Mussalmans, Sikhs and Hindus have proved themselves almost equally guilty; and this mark of disgrace on the forehead of our generation will be remembered for years to come. As a result of this hideous criminality, the like of which is not to be found in the whole history of our ancient land, no Hindu minority worth mentioning has been left in West Punjab and the Frontier Province; and as an inevitable consequence, which everyone with common sense could have foreseen, the Muslim minorities have been driven out of East Punjab and the adjoining Indian States. At the moment it seems that the blame for the destruction of the Hindu minority in West Punjab and the Frontier rests entirely on the League leaders in Pakistan, while responsibility for the destruction of the Muslim minority, as a retaliatory measure, rests on the Hindu and Sikh leaders of the area concerned. But it is evident to the discerning even now, and will be accepted as an incontrovertible fact in course of time, that another agency has been at work and is responsible for the situation that has inevitably led to this holocaust. Alone among the political groups of this country, the Congress High Command has retained its sanity and balance and has adhered, in spite of increasing difficulties, to its

conception of a democratic and secular state, which derives its strength from the age-old moral and spiritual traditions of our people. Judging from what it has accomplished, the Nehru Cabinet gives us a fine vision of the future National Governments of India.

It is absolutely unnecessary to state that, so far as the historian of India is concerned, the country has always been one and indivisible, and will always continue to be so. The unity of India is one of the fundamental postulates of Indian moral consciousness, and the longing for a centralised administration has been one of the most visible and persistent demands of the political spirit of the Indians throughout the ages. All the greatest achievements of our past have somehow gone with the establishment of a central administration at Pataliputra, Kannauj, Ujjain or Delhi. The breaking up of India into two separate States, or law making organisations with exclusive citizenship, which creates a spirit of hostility, and in any case of independence and separateness, not only between the governments but also between the people, and the establishment of one of these States on a purely religious and communal basis—this sort of monstrosity has never been known to the history of our land. The public opinion of the Indian Union persistently demands a re-unification of the country. I will humbly put it to our rulers here that they are not only responsible to their electorate and their party-organisation but also to history—to the generations that have gone and the generations that are yet to come. National freedom without national unity loses three-fourths of its value, and the reunion of India should be one of our primary aims. But if the universal verdict of history is of any value, this reunion should be brought about by peaceful methods. Force in modern times creates more problems than it solves, and the alternative to peace is death. No intelligent Indian should talk of civil war. Our demand for unity is based on the fact that, in spite of the present political arrangements, the conception of a common citizenship continues on both sides of the present artificial frontier. Given wise, statesman-like and patient guidance—even on one side—this conception will in due course re-assert itself in the political institutions of our people.

## II

Current political problems do not come within the scope of our Congress, but the study of Indian civilisation

in all its aspects is our primary aim. It is also (as Carlyle puts it) the duty of the historian "to tell what o'clock it is in the history of mankind."

On the fundamental unity of our country—the sacred land where the black gazelles graze and the *munja* grass grows and the *pan*-leaf is eaten, and where the material and the spiritual are organically interwoven—there has been no difference between the Indian intelligentsia at any time. But the character of that unity has differed from age to age, and I will content myself with examining one aspect of it, which in some respects is of supreme importance.

Of the founders of Indian unity and Indian civilisation during the Indus Valley period and the centuries preceding it, no memory remains either in legend or song. But it is possible to define the character of the civilisation of the Hindus or the Indians (both these words are derived from our frontier river, the Indus) as a unified growth within the historic memory of our people. Its basis is *Dharma*, the universal law of morality which must always regulate the relation of man and man. Hinduism has no known founder, no dogma or exclusive standpoint and, interpreted in its largest sense, it has no scriptural texts in which all are required to believe. The Khwarazmian scholar, Abu Raihan Alberuni, in trying to discover a universal principle in the religion of the Indians in the early eleventh century, thought he found it, first, in the doctrine of metempsychosis, and, secondly, in the belief in the one and unseen God; the Hindu intelligentsia, he tells us, "would never dream of worshipping an image manufactured to represent Him. But philosophical atheism has been freely" tolerated in our land and belief in metempsychosis has not been so universal as Alberuni supposed. Still, the first foreign scholar, who made a critical study of Indian 'culture-groups,' could not fail to note that supreme principle of Indian civilisation—the principle of toleration—without which the co-existence of the 'culture-groups' would not have been possible. But he underrated its importance. "On the whole," he says, "there is very little disputing about theological topics among themselves; at the most they will fight about words, but they will never stake their souls or their bodies or their property on religious controversy." It was not to be expected that in a country so large all people would develop the same world-philosophy or agree on a uniform mode of living.

So almost from the beginning of our recorded history every Indian, who had the capacity to do so, has been free to organise any sort of sect, philosophical school, religious order or *sangha*. The process, as we all know, still continues. There was, if anything, too much of freedom and even criminal practices were tolerated where outsiders were not concerned. These culture-groups were by their nature expansive and lived by proselytisation. One and all they tried to get an all-India status, for without such a status their footing could never be secure. And in the course of their organisational work, they inevitably drew closer the bonds between the various parts of the country. All that is great in the history of the Hindu period is due to the achievements of the culture-groups. The free development of these culture-groups was only possible on the basis of tolerance; religious persecution is totally alien to the spirit of our land. But it followed as a necessary corollary that every Indian had to be a member of some culture-group. The man with no culture-group to protect him and to guarantee his behaviour was a complete outlaw.

The advent of Islam made no essential difference in the general character of our country. But in order to lift the curtain that, for political purposes, has been laid over the history of our middle ages. I feel bound to make a few explanatory remarks. There is no term in classical Arabic or Persian that can express the conceptions of 'sovereignty' and 'state', which Europe evolved in the sixteenth century. The conceptions themselves are absent. The term "Allah and His Prophet" are used by the Quran; but all educated Muslims have during the last thirteen centuries agreed with Imam Abu Hanifa that there could be no question of continuing the government of "Allah and His Prophet" after the death of Hazrat Ali. All Muslim governments, thereafter, have been secular organisations, combinations of politicians for their political objectives, bourgeoisie affairs. Neither in India nor elsewhere did medieval Islam ever postulate a "Muslim state" as distinct from a government by Muslim officers—apart perhaps from a sort of spirit-consoling dream that the government of "Allah and His Prophet" would be possible once more when Jesus Christ arises or Imam Mahdi returns. Concerning existing governments, and their possible alternatives, Muslim religious consciousness of the higher type has always adhered to the traditions of Imam Hambal and Imam Abu Hanifa and regarded them as sinful organisation



whose service is forbidden to the true seekers after Allah. In the religious literature of the Indian Muslims, there is no idolisation of the great rulers of Delhi and, so far as possible, even reference to contemporary rulers is avoided.

The overwhelming mass of the Muslims of this land have an undoubted Indian paternity. It is true that there are innumerable Muslim families in India who claim a foreign origin, but this affiliation is purely fictitious. Owing to the Suljuq, Ghazz and Mongol invasions of Central Asia and Afghanistan, such Turkish fugitives as could do so migrated to our country in distress during the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries. It is these fugitives, and not the so-called 'invaders', who have given us the only block of immigrants worth mentioning in the history of the middle ages. But their identity has been completely lost, and no one meets Central Asian Turkish families in India today. As to the Indian Muslim 'foreigners' of the last four or five centuries, the general practice has been that a Rajput converted to Islam is called a 'Pathan', while a converted working man and peasant is pushed still higher and becomes an Arab of the Koraish tribe. Most converts to the new faith belonged either to the lower peasantry of the countryside or to the working classes of the cities, and mostly to the latter. There is a complete historical justification for the claim of the 'Koraish' and 'Ansar' political organisations that between themselves they represent 80% of the Musalmans of India. Their proportion is in all probability higher still. The Muslim culture-group or *millat* has always been what it is today—a body belonging primarily to the indigenous working class and the *petit bourgeoisie*. This is also the primary reason for its survival, in spite of the complete disappearance of the Turkish governing class.

In days when we were suffering from an inferiority complex owing to the brutal fact of a foreign government, which seemed unshakable, we made the best we could of our medieval Rajput Rajas and Turkish Sultans. That attitude is no longer necessary; and the plain truth has to be told that all our medieval governments were intensely exclusive aristocratic organisations. Some of them worked for the public good; others most certainly did not. But one and all they were confined to the cream of the aristocracy—Rajputs among the Hindus, Turkish and Afghan bureaucrats and nobles among the Muslims. War and politics were games which only the well-born were allowed

to play. The governments were in no sense governments of the people. An analysis of the officers of the Moghul and the pre-Moghul governments of Delhi will reveal the plain and sad fact that Muslims of Indian birth were rigidly excluded from the higher military and civil offices of the state. An Indian Muslim had as little chances of becoming war-lord of the Empire of Delhi as a Hindu *Sudra* had of ascending a Rajasthan throne. The so-called Muslim period of Indian history is really the Turkish period with two Afghan interludes in between. It seems ironical giving the name of Muslim period to a time when the Mussalmans of India, by the unfortunate fact of their birth, were excluded from all high offices. The position of the Indian Mussalmans in the middle ages was, if a very rough simile be allowed, not unlike that of the Indian Christians during the British period. The democratic spirit of Islam and its principle of equality has been a powerful social influence among the indigenous Muslims, but it would be vain to regard our medieval period as an expression of Islamic democracy or Islamic equality. Neither of the two great Empires of the middle ages gave to the Indian Muslims the representation they have got in the present Congress regime.

To sum up : Government during the Hindu period had been a function of the aristocracy, never of the culture-groups or their leaders. The same principle of political organisation continued during the Turkish period with a change in the personnel of the governors.

Two reforms in this time-honoured system, which was becoming unworkable, were attempted by Akbar the Great. First, he combined the Turkish and Rajput nobility into the bureaucracy of the Moghul Empire with remarkable success. Secondly, in consonance with his policy of *sulh-i-kul* (universal peace), he made a vigorous attempt to harmonise all Indian culture-groups. In the semi-religious and non-religious spheres, like architecture, painting and music, his success was significant. But in the purely religious sphere he failed completely. We need not be surprised at the fact that the greatest of our medieval rulers failed in achieving what Indian public opinion alone can accomplish.

The English government succeeded against its European rivals because, among other things, it was out to establish not the dominance of a Christian culture-group but merely of an English governing class with the



help of existing Indian vested interests, and of interests specially created to support the foreign power. So on the one hand, it subsidised a conflict of culture-groups and established for itself the prestige of being the sole possible arbiter between them. On the other hand, it felt that as a governing authority it would not be able to function successfully unless it deprived the culture-groups of a large sphere of their power. It is to this fact that we owe the establishment of the modern judiciary and the promulgation of the Anglo-Indian codes. But even here it had a historical precedent to follow. Criminal law even in ancient times had been a function of government. The Moghul Empire had developed its own system of criminal law, independent of the *shariat* and the *shastras*, along with principles of adjudication where litigants of two different culture-groups were concerned.

The problem must not now be viewed in its medieval setting. The situation has completely changed. While on the one hand, Akbar and all previous rulers could only give us an all-India or imperial government, the national movement has given us a sovereign or law-making State. On the other hand, the culture-groups have also completely altered their basic character along with their aims and objects during two centuries of British rule. The old culture-group provided for its members the road to salvation. Incidentally it also promised a 'culture-group paradise' and denied that paradise to all other culture-groups. But since their points of differences could only be settled in the other world, there was no difficulty in working on the principle of religious toleration here below. The modern culture-groups have completely shifted their ground; they have become "communities" seeking their material interests at the expense of other communities and the general body. There is little or no theological conflict in the land worth mentioning; only the material interests of the old historic groups are involved. And since material interests, unlike spiritual values, are believed to be hostile, so that one group can have nothing except at the expense of another, the conflict has become increasingly bitter. The only relation between the modern community and the old culture-group is the fact of physical descent and such historic continuity as physical descent involves. The spiritual values so dear to the culture-groups of the past have almost completely vanished; simultaneously what was best in the moral and spiritual acquisitions of the old culture-groups has become the inheritance of all Indians.

The tragedy of it from the view-point of the Indian nationalist lies in the fact that while the historic culture-groups are more and more inclined materialism and, I feel sorry to add, even to gangsterism, the hold of the 'community' over the individual is as complete today as it was in the middle ages. It is impossible even now to be an Indian without being member of an Indian community. There is, I believe, at present no graveyard in the land to which an Indian could lay claim merely on the basis of his Indian citizenship, and admission to every one of them lies through some community-rite. Apart from the meagre and insufficient provisions of the Act of 1873, the Indian citizen has neither a law of marriage nor a law of inheritance. Social conventions and social prejudices, stronger than they have ever been in the past, strengthen the slavery of the individual. He is completely at the mercy of the community and its leaders in every sphere, including even the sacred sphere of his personal and domestic life.

This, I believe, is the real challenge of the hour. The old culture-groups have (as already remarked) no longer any specific spiritual concepts nor any particular modes of life, except such as have survived through dead habit. It has been generally accepted in India since Akbar's time that there is little or no difference between the fundamental principles of religions, and our communal leaders do not raise the religious issue. The struggle is entirely between the self-seeking communities, descended from the old culture-groups, and the national welfare as represented by the State. The present-day 'communalist' is a creature of tradition, a tradition so vitiated as to be next door to barbarism. The future 'citizen' will be a creation of laws consciously planned for the public good. The fundamental task of the Indian State, therefore, is to create 'a National Culture-group' or 'a National Community', which may inherit all that is best in the culture-groups of old, and set us free from the vicious interests, which are seeking to dominate over lives. The process requires a thorough uprooting of old and proved evils and a careful co-ordination of elements of proved value. Differences of religion there are and will be; in this there is no harm. But unless the Revolution succeeds in creating one State, one Law and one National Community for the whole land, we will be faced with a period of anarchy such as India has never witnessed in the course of her long and much-troubled past.

## III

The history of the British period can now be written, and it is to be hoped that it will be written without enmity or resentment—that all defects of Indian character and Indian institutions, which made the foreign rule possible, will be frankly confessed and every element of value that we have received from the Britisher will be gratefully recognised. The material for it in this country, though not complete, is both extensive and unexplored.

We have, further, to squarely face the fact that our historical vision will and must undergo a complete change with reference to all our past. History, of course, begins with fact-finding. But there are always gaps between facts, and these have to be filled up by some sort of hypothesis. History at its very foundation cannot, therefore, get rid of a certain pragmatic element. There is, on the other hand, the personal equation of the writer—the tendency, for example, of many historians like Froude, Emile Ludwig and Harold Lamb and, I add with considerable hesitation, a fairly large section of our own writers on ancient and medieval India, to live in a dream world of their own construction. The temptation of pandering to the fanaticism of our culture-group or community, I feel confident, most of us can resist. But we have to take care that the traditions of our culture-group do not subconsciously colour our vision. History, as a Persian writer has rightly remarked, is quickly exported from the academy to the *bazar* and “shopkeepers, who cannot distinguish white from black and black from white, confidently venture to pass judgments on historical matters.” In the peculiar conditions of our country, when history as a subject of basic education will be taught to an increasing number of raw youths on a nation-wide scale, we cannot be too particular about the moral issues involved. The historian must speak the truth. On that question there can be no two opinions. But history is a normative science; the historian is not only concerned with facts but also with judgments; and this involves a conception of morality and justice. The Greek historians wrote to show the supremacy of the free-born Greeks over the barbarians, and the Romans to harp on the right of the aristocracy of their City to dominate the world. A very large number of English histories of the nineteenth century were written to serve the cause of British imperialism. The Indians also have to find some standard, subjective, as

well as objective. If we are true to the teachings of our greatest thinkers from the composers of the Vedic hymns to Mahatma Gandhi, our moral standards will be universal and absolute. Every man and every movement must be judged by the highest standards of morality of which that age was capable. Humbly, but confidently, I feel that if we here could adopt for history the standards accepted by our ancestors for the highest interpretation of religion and ethics, it will be a refreshing and much-needed contribution to the historical vision of mankind. If on the other hand, we merely write to justify the exploitation of one group of Indians by another in our own country—or of man by man anywhere—our freedom has been won in vain.

It is to be hoped that the National Governments will be able to do something about a matter that has been distressing most of us—provision of the basic material of history. The National Archives is an excellent institution, but its scope is limited. The Archæological Department deserves the gratitude of all students of history, but its sphere of work has to be expanded. The basic material for the history of a country like ours would include everything from the stone-implements of the earliest man to the latest government records, and my humble suggestion is that we should have at Delhi a National Institute similar to the British Museum and Provincial Institutes at the provincial capitals. The material collected should not be confined to history only; everything that concerns Indian culture should be there. The unfortunate fact is that individual effort and enterprise can do very little in this sphere, and the development of sound Indian scholarship is conditioned by the state undertaking this necessary task. Without it we are helpless. All available material should be provided at one place or at a few easily accessible spots. My humble suggestion is that we should put our heads together and submit a complete and detailed plan for the consideration of our Governments.

The proper and necessary sphere of state-action is the provision of material, including all other steps that are necessary for its proper utilisation, such as the publication of photographic copies and of translation which private enterprise will not take up. But the state should not interfere in the question of interpretation. Organisations like ours are entitled to partial help from the state, but these grants should be unconditional. The writing of

histories should not, as a rule, be directly subsidised by the state and the creation of monopolies in text-books is objectionable on many grounds. In those rare cases where a work of great historical merit, or of merely local value, cannot find a market, its publication should be left to state-aided and semi-official bodies. Under the old regime we wrote in a spirit of constraint; even when we wrote courageously, the fact of foreign domination deflected our minds in some direction or other. Our national leaders should now be willing to pass on to us a fraction of the freedom they have obtained. A state-dominated interpretation of history is one of the most effective means of sabotaging democracy. A free India implies a free history of India in which every point of view has a right to be heard. Free and untrammelled discussion will lead us to the truth; and there is no other way of teaching it.

The last consideration I wish to submit is necessary in view of the changing conditions of our country, and fear that it may raise controversies does not justify silence. Most writers of Indian history in the past, it has to be frankly confessed, have belonged to the "bourgeoisie culture group" and this fact has inevitably coloured their vision. Modern works on Indian history do not show any antipathy to the peasants and the working classes, but their attitude to the higher classes has been one of uncritical adulation. So apart from some specific phases—the constitution of the Hindu village organisation, for instance, or our medieval land tenures—the life of the Indian working classes has received scant attention at our hands. The general tendency has been to turn away from the problem; the little good that has been done to them by our revenue administrations and royal and aristocratic charities has been boastfully recorded. The great misfortunes under which they have laboured throughout the centuries go completely unnoticed. I do not wish to postulate the theory of class-conflicts, nor am I unaware of how difficult the application of this theory becomes when, regardless of the fact that it is based on the experience of Europe during the modern machine-age, it is applied to all countries and all times. That the lower classes have always been taxed heavily to maintain their superiors is undeniable; but considering that man over the larger part of the earth's surface—Australia, Africa south of the Sahara, Siberia and the two Americas—has been unable to make any progress in the course of history, it is difficult to decide whether, in the interest of humanity as a whole,

aristocratic and bourgeoisie leadership has, or has not, deserved the price it has exacted. Still the fact remains that we are content, like our predecessors, to survey the Indian social landscape from the foot of the royal throne. The lot of the Indian worker and everything connected with it—his wages, the prices of commodities necessary for the maintenance of his family, the struggles of his life, his joys, his sufferings and his hopes—all these are a virgin field for the historical investigator. The material is not so plentiful as one could wish, but industrious investigation will enable us to get a fairly complete picture. The same applies to the culture of the working class groups; a few elements of it have worked their way into recognition, but most of them have only been noticed in order to be condemned. The free India of today demands an urgent rectification of this "oversight". We are at the threshold of the machine-age. Most of our future problems will be labour problems and problems of social reconstruction. It is not our duty to knock down old temples; every element of value in them must be preserved. But we have to build a new shrine. The tendency towards socialism will gain in weight and volume as with every succeeding year the working classes strive to come to their own. The historian must not fail to do his duty by India as, in the generations to come, she marches forward courageously and hopefully to prostrate herself with reverence and devotion at the mist-shrouded steps that lead to the shrine of her new-found, classless God.