



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Convocation Address at Peshawar University

His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan

November 30, 1967

Peshawar, Pakistan

Mr Chancellor, Mr Vice Chancellor, professors, students of this university and distinguished guests,

I am deeply moved by the kindness of your welcome and by the outstanding honour this University has done in bestowing an honorary degree upon me today. I speak these words in no formal sense, but from the heart. I do this especially because, as a Muslim it will remain a proud memory that the first such academic honour I have received has been given to me by this renowned Islamic seat of learning in Pakistan.

This degree is all the more precious because of the illustrious personages who have been earlier recipients of your honour, and because this University is situated in one of the most historically awesome sites on earth. Speaking to you today, I cannot fail to recollect the names of people, places, and civilisations which light the glittering past of this region. Peshawar is not only the gateway of Central Asia, but much more it is a jewel box of history. The walls are nature's mountainous fortifications and the key is the Khyber Pass. Inside are the names of many of history's most precious jewels: Gandhara, the Greeks, the Buddhists, the Huns, the Brahmins, the Ghaznavids, the Mughals, the Sikhs, the Afghans, the Iranis, the Uzbeks, the Tajeks, the Afridis, the Aryans, Alexander the Great, Darius, Genghis Khan, the Sassanians, Kandahar and many more. Few cities of learning can boast such a variegated and colourful past.

I have had the good fortune to have seen much of this world since I travel more widely than most people, and my responsibilities bring me into contact with the advanced industrial societies of the West, and with the less developed, newly independent nations in Asia, and Africa. Some of the contrasts I have observed have convinced me that by no means do all the advantages and hopes for the future lie with the wealthier developed nations of the world.

Leaders of newly independent nations often comment, sadly or angrily as the case may be, on the widening gap between the rich nations and the poor. But there are two ways of looking at this, either in the absolute, in which case even the poorer nations are making considerable progress, or relatively where the gap between the two groups in living standards and technological progress continues to widen at a frightening speed.

The explanation for all this is well enough known to you. We have the population explosion, the shortage of human skills and material capital, the problems of political stability, and so forth. The list is a long one and the solutions will not quickly or easily be found.

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One particular problem which is endemic to most countries and to which the President of Pakistan refers in his recent illuminating autobiography, is inevitably more keenly felt in newly independent nations. After generations, sometimes centuries of foreign rule, ordinary people find it hard to associate themselves and their own fortunes with those of their Governments. For so long “they”, the rulers, have been quite literally a race apart, remote and distant from the ordinary activities of daily life.

The moment of independence may release this mental vacuum for a while, but it takes a great deal of time-consuming work by already hard-pressed leaders to stop the old habits of apathy creeping back again.

However, in all these complex and some times well-worn arguments, I often find myself on the side of the optimist. I do not believe that the scales are irretrievably loaded on the side of the rich, developed nations of the West. Even in a purely material sense the newer nations have more assets than they sometimes realise.

The very fact that the younger nations are experiencing rapid social and economic change after independence, makes their people more adaptable to new machines and new techniques. They should realise this, seek out the facts, identify them and then fully exploit what they can offer. This may involve training a small team of experts whose single task is to keep a constant watch on the opportunities arising from research and new developments overseas.

In many cases new industrial and production processes can be tested more thoroughly and less expensively in the developing countries than in the Western world where labour is costly and unionisation often chokes young and new ideas before they can reach maturity. Here in Pakistan many new industrial ventures are utilising processes which are at least partially experimental. This enables your youth to be in permanent contact with the vanguard of industrial developments and such an adventurous spirit must be encouraged. I fear less the inability of young countries to create new ventures than the rapid assassination of new projects by obsolescence.

Material progress apart, I do not think it should ever be assumed that only the smaller, poorer nations are faced by apparently insoluble problems. Western Europe and North America possess much that can be envied. They also face social and moral conflicts which are far more daunting than known in Asia or Africa. Increasingly, I believe, thinking people both in Europe and America are asking: Where is this all prosperity leading us? Are we any happier? Do we get as much satisfaction out of living as did our fathers and forefathers?

These indeed are relevant, urgent questions. There has been a fundamental challenge to the traditional and in this case, mainly Christian religious values. The younger generation has almost completely forsaken its churches. The pressure of an acquisitive society has made quite frightening demands on family life. Mothers with younger children go out to work in the millions. The juvenile crime rate soars upwards, homes are broken, and the family unit itself is undermined at its source.



The working family in the West can earn all the money it needs in four or five days a week - and then with only six hours work a day. Its capacity for leisure is growing every year. But what does the family do with it? Look at television? Perhaps. But what will be seen on television? Are they any nearer the complete and contented man of all our dreams?

Few would risk an affirmative answer to these questions. What has been called the permissive society where anything goes, nothing matters, nothing is sacred or private any more, is not a promising foundation for a brave and upright new world. This fearful chase after material ease must surely be tempered by peace of mind, by conscience, by moral values, which must be resuscitated. If not, man will simply have converted the animal instinct of feeding himself before others and even at the expense of others, into perhaps a more barbaric instinct of feeding himself and then hoarding all he can at the cost of the poor, the sick and the hungry.

It would be wrong and very foolish not to recognise that the developed industrial countries also have much from which the new nations can learn. The picture is not all dark but it might well deteriorate.

The West has achieved, on the whole, a degree of political stability and administrative efficiency which other parts of the world cannot but envy. The West has won the freedom to enjoy, and at times often slips into the licence of abusing, the pursuits of leisure and culture. They have won this freedom, not for a privileged few, but for the great mass of their people.

Two questions arise. First, do we wish for the developing nations of the world similar freedom to enjoy a more prosperous life? There can be no doubt that the answer is "yes".

The second question is more delicate. If the developing nations succeed in raising the standards of living to such an extent that there is far greater freedom and privilege to enjoy leisure, how is this leisure to be used, and what values will govern its use?

It is here that the East, that Asia, nay that this very University can contribute something of primordial and everlasting value. It is my deepest conviction that if Islamic society is to avoid following blindly the course of Western society without taking the trouble to raise guards against the latter's weaknesses and deficiencies, a thorough rediscovery, revitalisation and reintegration of our traditional values must be achieved.

They must be drawn forth from under the decades of foreign rule which have accumulated like thick sets of paper that have rested for generations on top of the finest oriental painting making the edges turn yellow, but the centre piece remaining as colourful and lively, for us to discover, as when it was originally completed. In all forms of art, painting, calligraphy, architecture, city planning; in all forms of science, medicine, astronomy, engineering; in all expressions of thought, philosophy, ritualism, spiritualism, it is of fundamental importance that our own traditional values and attitudes should permeate our new society.

It would be traumatic if those pillars of the Islamic way of life, social justice, equality, humility and generosity, enjoined upon us all, were to lose their force or wide application in our young society. It must never be said generations hence that in our greed for the material



good of the rich West we have forsaken our responsibilities to the poor, to the orphans, to the traveller, to the single woman.

The day, we no longer know how, nor have the time nor the faith to bow in prayer to Allah because the human soul that He has told us is eternal is no longer of sufficient importance to us to be worthy of an hour of our daily working, profit-seeking time, will be a sunless day of despair.

It is eminent seats of learning such as this that can synthesise and transmit to the younger generations the proper balance between the Western search of well-being and the Eastern spiritual, human and cultural traditions. I believe the future does reserve better standards of living for us than what we have at present, but in order to enjoy them fully, we must know today what will be the fundamental principles of our lives tomorrow.

I render sincere and high tribute to Peshawar University that has set out to fulfil this essential and monumental task.

May Allah crown your efforts with brilliant success.