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Welcome Address

OUR NATIONAL LIFE seems too overshadowed by politics to reach the essence of people's lives. Religion, culture, language, literature—the whole identity of a person is determined by politics. However, this phenomenon is restricted only to urban culture. Thanks to liberal economic policies the urban middle class is expanding very fast, but they do not constitute more than 10 percent of our population. Therefore the sources of true culture and basic identity are our villages and suburbs, and bearing that environment in mind we have to address the question of identity and culture. I observed this 90 percent of India from close quarters with all its complexities during my last assignment as Uttar Pradesh Congress Committee (UPCC) Chief and realized the urgency to take up and address some of their issues. For example, the common people of the Urdu-speaking community have shared with me their grievances and concerns regarding their education, which revealed many things to me. Some may call it politics—let them do so—but you may call this my “cultural agenda.”

As a politician, many people might see my actions as politically motivated. But my assignment as UPCC President has exposed me to the pathetic situation of Urdu in Uttar Pradesh. Urdu, the finest expression of our composite culture and a pillar of secularism, has suffered in Uttar Pradesh for the simple reason that the whole system of Urdu education was terminated by one stroke of the pen in 1951. I use these words with regret, but lesser words would not express the tragedy of Urdu in Uttar Pradesh—its traditional heartland. Apart from legitimate political dimensions, I have tried to study this situation as a student of Indian Polity and Constitutional Law. I have tried to access all the relevant material.

I would like to acknowledge the economic and educational backwardness of Muslims (with whom Urdu has virtually been singularly associated) that gave birth to many frustrations resulting in the weakening

of our institutions and our intellectual degeneration. One can easily understand these facts since the chemistry of our helpless intelligentsia does not originate in some complicated sociological theory but is a result of such historical factors.

The educational problems of Muslims are obviously complex. Our intelligentsia have not given a serious thought to them. I have some random and superficial notions about the problem.

In general Muslims do not have the resources to send their wards to English-medium private schools. They are as, if not more backward than a Hindu or a Buddhist of the same class. Despite general acceptance of the excellence and commercial value of English-medium education, the Government also cannot transform its education system into an English-medium one. State governments provide education only in their respective regional languages. Hence adequate facilities for teaching in their own language must be provided.

Urdu, as a cultural heritage, is part of Muslim sensibility. This is also the medium of religious education. In all the North Indian states the education system has forced Muslims to abandon the language of their cultural identity. The result is that people who want to learn Urdu need to either make their own part-time arrangements to learn the language or seek admission in *madrasas* basically set up to impart religious education. Part-time arrangements are also not a feasible proposition in general because the economic condition of an average Urdu-speaking person would not allow for this. However, let us hope that after the Ninety-Third Constitutional Amendment, which provides the fundamental right to get an education up to the age of 14 years, arrangements for Urdu education will be made available to them.

In post-Partition India, when Urdu's fate was sealed with its ouster from the secular education curriculum, *madrasas* were the only places where it continued to exist and they became repositories of Urdu. But we should not forget that *madrasa* education is intimately associated with religious identity. These *madrasas* impart education primarily in the Urdu medium, but they do not necessarily represent those who insist upon their religious identity. A large number of students come from very poor economic backgrounds and they cannot afford education elsewhere. Since *madrasas* depend entirely on donations from the Muslim community, students do not have to pay for their education. Religion is definitely an important part of their lives but *madrasa* education is not necessarily their conscious and free choice. There are only a few of them who take up higher education in the *madrasa* system as their career. We need not dwell

on these few. The question of how to improve the poor students' economic condition as well as their social status so they can access the general benefits of modern life remains? For this, education in contemporary subjects as well as technical education should be made a compulsory part of the religious curriculum of the *madrassa* system. But the authorities of the *madrassa* system have first to be convinced. Government should have no right to interfere in the religious education system. This would have very adverse consequences. However, local educated people and non-governmental organizations working among Muslims can play a significant role in inducing *madrassa* people to introduce subjects aimed at developing job skills and enhancing the capabilities of students.

On the other hand, despite the Constitutional affirmation of the status of Urdu as a national language, efforts have been made in the past to eliminate it from the social sphere by atavists with different faces. Earlier we could have dismissed them as an aberration, but now these forces of Hindutva are in power. After Independence, as a consequence of the partition of the country, Urdu was undermined by the deliberate decision to exclude it from the educational curriculum. Much water has flowed down the Yamuna since then. Many efforts have been made, such as by some left-wing intellectuals towards the end of the last century, but the agenda for Urdu's revival is still ineffective.

Over a period of time Muslims have gradually realized that the revival of Urdu education in the secular curriculum is needed because *madrassa* education is inadequate to ensure social status and economic growth. In the whole of Uttar Pradesh, where twenty million Urdu-speaking people reside, there is not a single Urdu-medium primary school. This is so despite the Constitutional directive (under Article 350-A) for education in the mother tongue. Even more surprisingly, North Indian states, particularly Uttar Pradesh, which do not have provision for Urdu education even as an elective subject, offer Sanskrit as a "modern" Indian language and it is compulsory up to class 12 as per the Three-Language Formula adopted by the Government.

These grating injustices suffered by Urdu-speaking people have posed a threat to the very survival of their language. Realizing this, the community has begun to equate the survival of Urdu and the revival of Urdu education with the well being of Muslims as a political, cultural and religious entity. A debate on this issue has begun. It remains to be seen whether this leads to a real political awakening in the future. Political will and educational empowerment are desperately needed to revive this language.

The eventual solution to the diverse problems of Muslims lies in political power augmented by the community's will to organize itself and harness that power. Despite being a politician I would prefer to focus on the educational problems of Muslims which need political intervention. I have worked towards this for the last five years and now I feel that the time has come to share this concern with like-minded people.

Urdu language is perhaps the most important aspect of Muslim sensibility. According to the census figures of 1991, India has 4.3 crores (43.3 million) Urdu speakers—despite the feeling that census records of the North Indian states may have recorded Hindi as the mother tongue of many Urdu-speaking people. These 43.3 million people will have a substantive role in political developments in the days to come. Given the trend of population growth in our country, this figure will increase in the census of 2001. Technically speaking, Urdu is the mother tongue of most North Indian Muslims. It is the language which fulfills religious needs because it has the largest number of books on religion besides Arabic. Naturally many Muslims of the Hindi region consider Urdu a part of their religious and cultural identity.

Perhaps due to its roots in Muslim identity, Urdu has incurred the wrath of the majoritarian communalists. A hatred campaign against Urdu has been a prominent part of the policies of some groups. Political parties have failed Urdu due to their fear of losing the favor of extremists.

Since Partition our intelligentsia have been sympathetic towards Urdu, but somewhat ineffectively. Few intellectuals have supported the cause of Urdu through their writings. The situation is so dismal that one can hardly find any academic writing in the field of social sciences focusing on the problems of Urdu. Research scholars pay scant attention to its problems. As a result we have no academic input for policy planning. Government policy concentrates only on Urdu literature and culture—promoting *mushā'iras*, fiction and criticism, etc. Government assignments for Urdu textbooks are routinely given to Urdu poets, littérateurs and so-called literary critics. Nobody—including Urduwallahs—spoke against this shortsighted treatment meted out to the education of a language. We drifted into a mediocre syllabus for Urdu-medium students—thus compelling low-income group Urdu speakers to put their children through Hindi-medium education. Urdu education is not even available in the North Indian region where a majority of Urdu-speaking people live. In states like Maharashtra where it is provided, the standard of the books is very low in comparison to those of the regional languages. Serious thought was never given to reevaluating these substandard books

which surprisingly include books provided by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT). It will not be inappropriate to mention here that the trend toward assigning the projects for preparing the syllabus for Urdu-medium students to poets and critics was established by the NCERT. Hence, one should not be surprised if today the institution has become a plaything of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), enthusiastically implementing the agenda of saffronization without assessing its academic credentials. Nonserious attitudes result in such follies. Although those in academia, having a great command of history and performing excellently in shaping the sensibilities of citizens, have promptly reacted against saffronization, it is sad that they remain remarkably ignorant of the not-very-intricate problems faced by Urdu-speaking people. The result of having left the future of Urdu education entirely to poets and writers was an esoteric and impractical Urdu syllabus up to the university level. The system of language education was thus derailed from the primary level to the university.

Our aim in organizing this conference is to undertake a realistic reappraisal of Urdu language in the formal system of education in contemporary India, to address the representation of Urdu and the community of its speakers and to explore the place of Urdu as a first and compulsory language in the Three-Language Formula which has been in force for the last 55 years. Urdu is deprived of its rightful place in the curriculum of secular education. Our conviction is that Urdu cannot survive as a language of cultural expression unless it is included as a medium of instruction and a subject (in the category of the first language as per the provisions of the Three-Language Formula) in the curriculum from the primary to the senior secondary level.

As a language of cultural heritage, Urdu can be chosen by students studying in English or in a regional medium. In those parts of northern India where Urdu-speaking people live in substantial numbers, Urdu can be offered as a medium of instruction up to the age of 14 years. Afterwards, students can learn it as a first, second or third language up to class 12, depending upon the available system.

We should of course teach foreign languages at least after class 10. For that purpose we must have more advanced systems. For those who wish to opt for a European language, a combined course with English may be introduced. The advanced course of Hindi and Sanskrit must be provided as an option for those who want to continue the study of Hindi and Sanskrit.

English-medium public schools and missionary schools, etc., should think seriously about the teaching of Indian languages. I am not optimistic that the problem will be resolved in one seminar but let us initiate a dialogue.

With these observations I emphasize:

1. Inclusion of Urdu in the secular curriculum from the primary level up to the age of 14 years as a medium of instruction in all Government schools and schools affiliated to state governments or state boards. For those who declare Urdu as their mother tongue, primary Urdu-medium schools must be provided in localities that meet the norm of 300 Urdu speakers.

2. From class 6 to class 12, under the Three-Language Formula, Urdu must be taught as a compulsory first language (exclusively the mother tongue) to Urdu-speaking children.

3. Hindi may be introduced as principal [compulsory] state language from class 4 and English as the third and compulsory language from class 6 to class 12.

4. From class 6 onwards Hindi should become the medium of instruction for those whose mother tongue is Hindi in North India in Government-run schools as well as in the schools which receive grants-in-aid from the state governments. For Urdu mother tongue students, Urdu should be included as the first and compulsory language along with Hindi as second compulsory language and English as third and compulsory language. From class 8 there should be a composite course of Hindi and Sanskrit for those whose mother tongue is Hindi and who wish to learn Sanskrit. Wherever the people declaring Urdu as their mother tongue comprise 300 houses in one or more than one locality, an Urdu-medium primary school should be opened for their children.

Unless Urdu is included in the school curriculum as a medium of instruction and as a first language no efforts for its revival will succeed. The survival of Urdu is the survival of our secular values and democratic tradition. To protect our secular values from extinction a strong political will and a national movement for the revival of Urdu is the need of the hour. If secular values are at stake, the future of all linguistic minorities will become bleak because anti-secular forces deny democratic space to every other identity. So it is high time Muslims, along with other religious and linguistic minorities, unite with secular and democratic forces for the preservation of their rich values. I must warn Muslims that unless they give up the old habits of looking towards others to take up the battle for their rights, they will remain marginalized. They should no longer think

that secular Hindus alone would fight for their cause. They have to join the fight for secular and democratic space and for their social and educational empowerment—if they no longer want to be seen as vote-banks. To get a secular education is their constitutional right for which they can legitimately demand to have schools and facilities in their mother tongue. We appeal to the entire society irrespective of political affiliations and loyalties to extend their support to this movement.

As in any other dynamic society, changes are taking place in India. The Ninety-Third Amendment of the Constitution of India, passed on 28 November 2001, provides the fundamental right to an education up to the age of 14 years. Children must get this education in their mother tongue—in the case of the Urdu linguistic minority, in Urdu. Before this Constitutional Amendment was proposed such education was already in existence. This can easily be extended to the new provision of education in the child's mother tongue at the primary level up to the age of 14 years. We are not opposed to English-medium education per se. But education in private institutions with English as the medium of instruction is a very costly affair, which most people of India cannot afford. Hence, every possible step must be taken to improve the system of education in Indian languages. □