

Address by
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JAMIA MILLIA ISLAMIA
New Delhi

Your Holiness, the Dalai Lama, members of Jamia's faculty and students.

The occasion of an Annual Convocation is an opportunity for Vice Chancellor to talk about the University's achievements over the past one year. But I would be foolish to talk of small achievements because we must use this extraordinary opportunity to, in fact, soak in the presence of His Holiness, and therefore I use this opportunity to talk of His Holiness and the values he shares with our ancient land than the usual Vice Chancellor's report.

We meet here today for the conferment of a degree, but in truth, the degree is merely an occasion for members of our university, especially our students, to stand in the presence of greatness. It's not often that you can say with confidence in the modern world, in a world where the idea of greatness has been devalued by a culture of celebrity, in a media environment where every other person can lay claim to five minutes of fame.

One of the tasks of the university, is to teach students to discriminate between truth and untruth, between profundity and shallowness, between enduring values and temporary fashions. One of the ways in which a university does this is by acknowledging and honouring those who

in their lives and work embody truth, profundity and permanence. There is no religious leader, no head of state, no intellectual in the world today whose life embodies these values as completely as that of the Dalai Lama.

There are three reasons why Jamia Millia Islamia is particularly honoured to host His Holiness today.

First, the Dalai Lamas have historically been the spiritual and temporal leaders of the Tibetan people, but in exile and adversity, the 14th Dalai Lama's aura has grown to encompass the world. His Holiness will often describe himself as a simple Tibetan monk, but he is not only the most visible symbol of one of the world's great religious traditions, Buddhism, he is also a great teacher and scholar.

Since this is a university function, and primarily a gathering of students, I should note that at the age of twenty three, despite the responsibilities of leadership, His Holiness successfully completed the requirements for the Lharampa degree, the equivalent of a doctorate in Buddhist philosophy, and passed with honours. For even the greatest and most evolved of men, the first step was study and scholarship. And the teachers in this gathering can claim His Holiness as one of their own: not only is the Dalai Lama a great teacher in the spiritual sense of that word, he was also, albeit briefly, a university teacher in 2007 when he accepted the Presidential Distinguished

Professorship at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.

Secondly, Jamia Millia Islamia was founded by visionary Muslim leaders not just on account of a zeal for education, but out of a passion for freedom and a fierce commitment to share that freedom with people of every religious denomination in a free India. The Jamia envisioned by Maulana Mohammad Ali Jauhar, Dr M.A. Ansari and Dr Zakir Hussain, was a pioneering teaching institution that would make Muslims full partners in the great project that is Indian pluralism. This pluralism is sometimes simplified into Hindu-Muslim amity. But this is to diminish grandeur of the pluralist ideal.

The presence of His Holiness reminds us that India is the birthplace of many great faiths and home to all of them. Great Buddhist teachers like Nagarjuna journeyed to Tibet in the 8th century to preach Buddhism and it is wholly appropriate that His Holiness should return to India to remind India of its Buddhist heritage and the rich diversity of its religious traditions.

In a world where countries announce their religious identities, where nations are labelled Christian, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu as if they were owned by religious communities, India remains a republic committed to an equal pluralism. His Holiness, as the greatest exponent

of inter-faith dialogue in the world, whose life has been full of conversations with rabbis, bishops, popes and priests of every description, is the living embodiment of the openness and good faith so necessary to living together in peace.

In traditional India, before European conceptions of nationalism gained ground in the subcontinent, people considered the soil of their homes, their lands, to be enriched and sweetened by the presence of sufis, and rishis and saints and holy men. I'd like to take a leaf out of that traditional conception and suggest that in the half a century that His Holiness has made India his home, he has, by his presence alone, made it a better place.

But the third and most important reason we are so honoured to have His Holiness in our midst is that he is the true inheritor in the contemporary world of the message of peace and non-violence pioneered by Mahatma Gandhi. In a world convulsed by neo-colonial wars and in an India shaken by violence born of injustice, fundamentalism and reasons of state, Mahatma Gandhi sometimes seems a quaint, quixotic figure, irrelevant to the conflicts and stresses of the modern world. If there is anyone who has stood for the power of non-violent persuasion in the contemporary world, who has restored our faith in relevance of moral critique, it is His Holiness,

the Dalai Lama. His Holiness himself has stressed his umbilical relationship with India; he has described his mission as the preaching of the cardinal Indian values of non-violence and religious harmony throughout the world.

In 1989 when the Nobel Committee awarded His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, the Nobel Peace Prize, it lauded his commitment to non-violence. The chairman of the committee went to the extent of saying that in awarding the prize to His Holiness, the Nobel Committee was, in part, paying tribute to the memory of Mahatma Gandhi. It is significant that in trying to make amends for their failure to confer the prize on the Mahatma during his life time, the only contemporary they saw as the Mahatma's spiritual heir was His Holiness.

Mahatma Gandhi, of course, was one of Jamia's chief supporters and sponsors from the time of its foundation. Jamia was born in the crucible of the first great non-violent mass campaign led by the Mahatma, the Non-cooperation Movement. Jamia Millia Islamia as an educational institution and His Holiness as a great teacher, are joined by shared values and a common mentor in Mahatma Gandhi. So it is both a great honour and a great pleasure for all of us in Jamia, to welcome His Holiness not just as great teacher, but as a kindred spirit.

And before I conclude, I call upon all the students here to understand the gravity of this moment. It is a moment that they step out in the World blessed by true Holiness, by an individual who embodies the best in humanism within a modern mind. So take in the event, enjoy your good fortune in being here today and may His Holiness' blessings keep you on a path that you will make this University proud of you.

Thank you