

Madam, Chairperson United Progressive Alliance and President of the Congress Party, Deans of faculties, Heads of Departments, Directors of Centres, our respected guests from the print and television media and dear students.

There are moments in the history of institutions that are very special. I believe that today is one such rare and special occasion when we have in our midst a person who genuinely cares for the underprivileged and who time and again has shown exemplary empathy for the cause of Indian women.

And here I have a small story to recount. About eight months ago, I had the good fortune of meeting Madam Gandhi. During

conversation I mentioned the difficulties our young girl students face in finding decent accommodation in the city. It did not take more than a second for her to respond and wonder if she could help us build new accommodation. It was just a chance conversation but she took it on herself to persuade the government to sympathetically consider our case, and I can only believe that she persuaded them vigorously because here we are today at the foundation ceremony that will house 400 girls in a fine, modern facility.

Madam, over the past 92 years, this university has provided, with great pride and courage, the best sort of patriotic and secular education. The bulk of my students who sit here before you do not come from the sophisticated and

rich upper classes of India. But we have the same ambition and nurture the same desire to be citizens that our great nation can be proud of. We seek out the same opportunities and we look forward to the same future as any young man or woman would do.

In this world when in the past 20 years, it has become accepted wisdom that the path to progress lies in free markets and the unfettered growth of the private sector, you are amongst the few world leaders who have remained steadfastly committed to providing a better quality of life to the poorest of the poor. The policies and programmes of the UPA and those of your party such as the provision of minimum days of labour to the landless under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment

Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), the push for reservations for the Other Backward Classes, the bill to ensure the fair representation of women in Parliament, the legislation to ensure food security for the poor, taken together indicate your deep commitment to the poorest in our country, a commitment that is often forgotten when we obsess about capital markets and the GDP.

Madam you have sponsored policies to enable the poorest of the poor because even in a democracy we need freedom from exploitation, we need freedom from poverty and above all we require freedom of choice. The constitution made us procedurally equal: we need the muscle of an enlightened state to achieve substantive equality.

How does a state with a thousand calls upon its time and treasury, forge a political compass that will reliably guide it to make the right intervention? Can we even speak of virtuous priorities in a world where a gathering consensus about the invisible wisdom of the market dismisses all government funding and subsidy as populism? The National Advisory Council chaired by Mrs. Gandhi has been precisely such a compass. It has been the indispensable conscience of the UPA government, which, like all political establishments, needs a still centre which can filter out the noise of everyday politics and offer durable counsel.

Compared to the game-changing scale of MNREGA, funding a girl's hostel might seem a

small thing, but both interventions spring from exactly the same political principle: the duty of care, the need to weigh the scales in favour of the excluded so that they can move from the wings of history to its main stage. Women hold up half the world, we're told, but in India they do so inspite of their menfolk. A university education in a Central University is a mirage unless young ambitious women from every part of India can enroll knowing that they will be residentially secure. The girls enabled by this hostel to live the university experience, will grow into independent young women. Security is indispensable for unscarred maturity. Jamia's hostels will incubate confident young women, leaders in every walk of Indian life. And for this Madam we are indebted to you.

Over the last 92 years, when we started in a small house in Aligarh, this University has today grown into a terrific modern University that runs over 250 courses ranging from pure arts, pure sciences, social sciences, fine arts, engineering, architecture, law and management. We have some of the finest faculty in India and you see in front of you some of the most disciplined and bright students.

Our effort here is to go beyond giving degrees. Our ambition is that when they leave this University our students have the ability to rise above their religion, rise above their caste and their region and step forth as mature adults joining the effort to make a great India.

For the past three days, when we heard of your programme to be with us, the students and teachers have been excited beyond words. On my own part and on behalf of the Jamia Millia Islamia I do not have words to express my gratitude to you for your affection and kindness towards this University and in the future too we look forward to your encouragement and assure you that nothing that we do will ever be less than the very best.

I end with the prayer that may God bless you Madam, may God bless the Jamia Millia Islamia and may God bless India.

Thank you ladies and gentlemen for being with us this evening.