

SPEECH AT JAMIA MILLIA CONVOCATION

It is a wonderful for me to become associated with this distinguished university in this marvellous way. I also feel very touched by the kind words ~~about me~~ that were spoken about me. Jamia Millia Islamia represents the confluence of several traditions of which India - and the world - have reason to be proud. It is a university dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge - that is the connection with "jamia," which means just that. It is a national institution of India, and was born as an integral part of the national movement - this is the significance of "millia" in its name. And the reference to Islamia indicates the particular historical tradition in India - the Islamic heritage and the rich Muslim history in the subcontinent - of which the university has reason to be proud. And I am proud too to become associated with the amalgam of these different, but interrelated, traditions - the richness of South Asian Muslim history, the strength of a unifying national movement in India, and the great pursuit of global knowledge to which this university is dedicated. I have reason indeed to be grateful to Jamia Millia Islamia to offer me their hand of friendship and affiliation.

There is nothing as boring for the audience as a long and long-winded convocation address. But I must not resist the opportunity of saying a few words about the importance of the pursuit of knowledge in general and that of university education in particular. Indeed, a convocation is a fine occasion to ask about the nature and contribution of university education.

Does higher education make a difference? It certainly can make a dramatic difference to human knowledge, skill and capabilities. But going beyond that, the role of higher education in social change can be quite crucial too. Our primary image of Mahatma Gandhi may not be that of a student bent over books on jurisprudence, but that is exactly what he did when he pursued the higher education that help him to become what he was. Similar things can be said about the college education of Adam Smith or Lord Byron or Karl Marx yesterday, or in our times, the academic training of Martin Luther King, or Nelson Mandela, or Aung San Suu Kyi (the courageous Burmese leader fighting for democracy there), or Mikhail Gorbachev, who did so much to bring

democracy to Russia and to end the Cold War. Gorbachev was, it is worth mentioning, the very first university-trained leader of the Soviet Communist Party, after Lenin, and the fact that he was instrumental in bringing democracy to Russia was not unrelated to the knowledge - and no less importantly self-confidence - that he had acquired, not least at the University.

Higher education is not only important for academic studies and for the development of knowledge, understanding and skill, it can also have profound influences on our day to day life, varying from social interaction to political openness. Mark Twain has described cauliflower as "nothing but cabbage with a college education." This may be an overestimate of college education, and it certainly is very unfair to cauliflowers, especially human ones. Many of our finest cauliflowers - from Shakespeare to Charles Dickens and Rabindranath Tagore - overcame cabbageness without the benefit of any college education.

And yet there is something quite extraordinarily productive about academic education. As a life-long academic, I am of course biased, but I certainly hold to the belief that the contribution of universities to the life of a nation - and of the world - can hardly be overestimated. As a teacher - a privilege I have had for more than 55 years now (I started university teaching at the age of 22) - one gets used to astonishing brightness. Even before you have asked your question, your student may proceed to answer it. He or she may sometimes explain modestly that there may be room for doubt in what you said just now, going on to add - perhaps not so modestly - that the question that you chose to ask left even more room for doubt about your appreciation of the problem. It is always thrilling to be reprimanded by a student who thinks ahead and who is doing what you expect him or her to do, and then some more. And the cultivation of questions and doubts and even of intellectual self-confidence is one of the highest contributions of higher education.

Indeed, the cultivation of doubts and the sharpening of questions are an integral part of university education. Its importance lies partly in the close connection between science and

doubting. Francis Bacon distinguished between two different contributions that doubts can make, in an essay on The Advancement of Learning, published in 1605, nearly 400 years ago. "The registering and proposing of doubts has a double use," Bacon said. One use is straightforward: it guards us "against errors." The second use, Bacon argued, involved the role of doubts in initiating and furthering a process of inquiry, which has the effect of enriching our investigations. Issues that "would have been passed by lightly without intervention," Bacon noted, end up being "attentively and carefully observed" precisely because of the intervention of doubts.¹ The constructive value of doubting is particularly worth remembering in contemporary debates.

The importance of doubts apply to every field of knowledge and practice - from science to politics, from religion to the prevailing currents of culture. If we look at the creativity of Muslim contribution to the richness of India's culture and history, scepticism with reasoning has played a big part there. For example, Emperor Akbar's radical departures - in religious tolerance, in legal reform, in the politics of inclusiveness drew on his overarching thesis that "the pursuit of reason," rather than "reliance on tradition," is the way to address difficult problems. That thesis - on the centrality of reason - what Akbar called "rahi aqal" - remains as central today as it was in his own time.

And so I end there, after thanking Jamia Millia Islamia for its kindness in admitting to the fellowship of this powerful academic community.