

JAMIAT ULEMA-i-HIND
30th Annual Conference

Speech of

Shri P. Chidambaram
Home Minister

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I am deeply grateful to you for the invitation to this special occasion, the Annual Conference of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind.

2. It is a new experience for me to address a group of religious scholars and leaders. However, I am comforted by the fact that the invitation was genuinely warm and was personally and graciously extended by Shri Mehmud Madani, my colleague in Parliament. I am also grateful to Shri Qari Mohammed Usman, President of the Jamiat e Ulema e Hind for his letter of invitation.

3. Today, you hold your 30th Annual Conference and I offer you my greetings and felicitations. I also bring to you a special message of greetings from Smt. Sonia Gandhi, Congress President and Chairperson, UPA. The most learned Ulemas of India – over 10,000 – are present this morning, and it is my honour to address them. I also greet the Rector of the Darul Uloom and recognize the presence of many renowned scholars.

4. We know that the JUH was founded in 1919 in order to lend the support of the Muslim clergy to the anti-British movement. It was among the first organizations that stood firmly on the side of the nationalist forces and resolutely opposed the two-nation theory espoused by the Muslim League. After Independence, the JUH has focused on the promotion of the social,

religious and economic interests of the Muslim community. I am therefore very happy to be able to share some thoughts with this august assembly.

5. Your invitation to me is a significant gesture. I take the view that it is part of my duty to reach out to every section of the people and understand their problems, their aspirations, their doubts, and their fears. It is my duty to learn about their history, their society, their evolution, and their place in contemporary India. It is also my responsibility to communicate to them the arduous nature of the task of nation-building and the duty of every citizen to contribute to making India a modern, strong, prosperous, just, humane and peaceful country.

6. Since the beginning of civilization, the world has always been torn by conflicts. The birth of free India was under circumstances that could only be described as traumatic. The scars of partition and of the largest migration in human history still remain. Post-Independence too, the country has witnessed numerous conflicts – caste against caste, religion against religion, language against language.

7. Nevertheless, we must always remember that pluralism is our inheritance. Pluralism should be our strength. It is only due to the thoughtless words and actions of some that we have, sadly, allowed our diversity to become differences.

8. The advent of Islam in the Indian sub-continent may have occurred during the life time of the Prophet himself. The Cheruman Juma Masjid in Kodungallur, in Kerala, is believed to be the oldest mosque in India. It was constructed in 629 A.D. by Malik Bin Deenar. According to historians, the first ship bearing Muslim travelers was seen on the Indian coast as early as 630 A.D. The spread of Islam was largely owing to the efforts of numerous Sufis. Sufis acted as missionaries and spread the message of Islam in a manner that the laity could understand.

9. India had always welcomed men imbued with high moral and spiritual ideas. It was a sign of our confidence in our innate strength. India thus became the most diverse multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-lingual society in human history. That is a matter of pride, especially when we see some countries struggling to come to terms with their new-found diversity.

10. We should not turn our back on our history and our heritage. We should not discount or diminish our unique strength; nor view our pluralism as a source of perennial conflict.

11. Let me recall some facts of history. One of the earliest acts of resistance to British rule was the Vellore Mutiny. It was in 1806, a good 50 years before the First War of Independence in 1857.

12. During the freedom struggle, hundreds of Muslim leaders fought and suffered, shoulder to shoulder, with leaders belonging to other faiths. Who can forget the glorious contribution of Maulana Mehmoodul Hassain, popularly known as Sheikhu Hind, Maulana Qasim Nanauti, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi, Saifuddin Kichlu, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, M.A. Ansari, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai and Badruddin Tyabjee and many other freedom fighters?

13. No less has been the contribution of Muslims in modern India. Among them were outstanding Deobandi scholars such as Maulana Hassan Ahmed Madani, Maulana Hibzur Rehman and Maulana Asad Madani. Other renowned Muslims including political leaders and scholars, actors and artists, and sportspersons and scientists, too numerous to be recounted by name, have enriched our society.

14. We cannot view Islam as an alien faith. Our Muslim brethren are honoured citizens of India. This is the land of their forbears; this is the land of their birth; and this is where they will live and work. It is a matter of

pride for us that all major religions of the world, including Islam, exist and thrive in India.

15. A nation can ignore its minorities only at its peril. The golden rule in a democracy is that it is the duty of the majority to protect the minority, be it religious, racial or linguistic. It is a self-evident rule. It is a rule that is firmly rooted in the universality of human rights. Hence, we have no hesitation in invoking that rule when Tamils are denied their rights in Sri Lanka or Indian students are assaulted in Australia.

16. There is also a sub-rule to the golden rule. What is a minority in one place could well be the majority in another place: for example, Muslims in Jammu & Kashmir or Sikhs in Punjab. In such situations, the roles will be reversed. Although a minority nation-wide, the Muslim community in Jammu & Kashmir is bound by the golden rule as well as the tenets of Islam to protect the minority communities in that State.

17. Alas, some think that the golden rule is dispensable or that it can be applied selectively. It is that thought that is pernicious. It is that thought that sows the seeds of communalism.

18. We must deplore communalism whenever and wherever it manifests itself in word or action.

19. Communalism is the negation of pluralism. Communalism also opposes modernity, rejects the idea of civil society, and opposes political freedom to the people.

20. Three lessons flow from a true assessment of the perils of communalism. Firstly, we must strive to build a modern nation. Secondly, we must reiterate the concepts of a civil society. And thirdly, we must expand the political freedoms and ensure that every person enjoys those undeniable and inalienable freedoms.

21. I believe that all Indians share a common cause – to fight communalism. That cause cannot be advanced by rhetoric alone. We must confront communalism with the instruments that will defeat communalism.

22. Moral and spiritual values form the core of a civilization. The education system must instill these values in its citizens, especially its children. Education, however, has a larger purpose. It must empower the child. The education system must turn the wonder of the child into inquiry and the bewilderment of the adolescent into discovery. It is mathematics and science, and that fruit of a historical conjunction, English, that will equip our children to build a modern India. The implementation of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, especially the Scheme for Providing Quality Education in Madrasas (SPQEM) and Infrastructure Development in Minority Institutions (IDMI) and the setting up of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV) provide the best assurance of quality education to Muslim children.

23. Civil society is based on a compact. There is an unspoken understanding among people who live together. At the core of this compact is tolerance. The sharper the differences, the greater must be the degree of tolerance. When this compact is eroded, the foundations of civil society are shaken. It is our duty to spread the message of tolerance and strengthen the strands that bind civil society.

24. In the final analysis, it is the assurance of political freedom, and all the rights associated with such freedom, that will defeat communalism. Equality, equal status, personal liberty, freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, right to education, right to work, right to property, right to information, and the other freedoms are the hallmark of a civilized nation. The Prime Minister's 15-point programme is intended to ensure that these freedoms are enjoyed by all minority communities, including the Muslim community.

25. While all manifestations of communalism are deplorable, the worst kind of communalism is unleashing communal violence. Violence and violent means to achieve any objective is the anti-thesis of a civilized society governed by the rule of law. The demolition of the Babri Masjid was a manifestation of religious fanaticism and an act of extreme prejudice. Likewise, taking to the path of violence in the name of religion must also be deplored in unequivocal terms. I am glad to note that the Darul Ulloom at Deoband issued a Fatwa against terrorism on February 25, 2008 and categorically stated that "Islam rejects all kinds of unwarranted violence, breach of peace, bloodshed, killing and plunder and does not allow it in any form." I regard that decree as a call to duty to not only Muslims but to all right thinking people. I would urge that more voices be raised, loudly and clearly, against terrorism and all forms of violence.

26. I belong to a political party, the Indian National Congress, that has for over a hundred years championed the cause of all the people of India without distinction of caste or creed. I represent a Government that is sworn to uphold the values of secularism, equality and democracy. I bring you the greetings and good wishes of my party and my government. I wish your deliberations success. May peace be with you and may your endeavours be blessed with success.