Address by
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ANNUAL CONVOCATION
30 October 2008

JAMIA MILLIA ISLAMIA
New Delhi
Excellencies, Members of the Jamia biradari, and my dear students:

Welcome to this important event in our university’s calendar. I want to congratulate the recipients of honours, degrees and awards. I wish you well in life.

Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me not to present a formal and benign report, as is usual on such occasions and instead speak as a concerned citizen heading a university which happens to be located in close proximity to a troubled locality. Allow me, therefore, to take you through some of the landmarks of the Jamia Millia Islamia -- on a guided tour, as it were.

As you cross the Holy Family Hospital, a symbol of the excellent work done by Christian missions, you would have noticed a large gate named after Qurratulain Hyder, a universally acclaimed novelist in Urdu. Some metres away is the Gulistan-i-Ghalib named after a poet who discounted all religious distinctions. The Dr. Zakir Husain Library is located on one edge of that complex; it is named after the President of the Republic who was our vice-chancellor from 1926 to 1948.

Across the road, you will notice the Bab-i-Azad, named after Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, a secularist par excellence. Next to it is the Bagh-i-Nanak. This garden, with fountains spaying and students sitting on the grass, is our modest tribute to Guru Nanak, a vibrant symbol of tolerance, humanity and goodness.
Walk a few steps before entering the Dabistan-i-Gandhi: this complex houses the M.A. Ansari Auditorium, named in memory of the Mahatma’s ‘infallible guide’ on Hindu-Muslim issues. The Dabistan-i-Gandhi also includes Nehru House, Safdar Hashmi Amphitheatre, Castro Café, and the brand new M. F. Husain Art Gallery inaugurated yesterday by Mr. Satish Gujral. These, and many other names (such as Nelson Mandela Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Mridula Sarabhai House, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan Enclave, Sarojini Naidu Centre for Women’s Studies, Jamnalal Bajaj House, Premchand Archives, Edward Said Hall, Arafat Hall, Khayabani- Ajmal, Habib Tanvir Open Air Auditorium, Chomsky Complex, among others) reflect Jamia’s Weltanschauung.

In our eclecticism lies our strength. At a time when trishul-wielding hooligans were let loose and sane voices of dissent suppressed, we conferred the Honoris Causa degree on M. F. Husain. A year later, we have this magnificent gallery which symbolises our commitment to free speech and dissent. It shall, in the years to come, we do hope, become a hub for artistic expression.

Our present mirrors our past, We backed the national movement wholeheartedly, and opposed the two-nation theory. This has all along been our raison d’etre. We are, and shall remain, an indispensable part of the composite edifice called India. We embody the ‘idea’ of India. Long years ago, the revolutionary Urdu poet Mohammad Iqbal had reminded us in rousing words:

اے آپ دو گھا ہو انہ کہ یہ تو ہے
اے تیرے دو ہر ہے بہ کو باران بارا

O pristine waters of the Ganga, do you remember that day
When our caravan stopped by your bank.

Nobody dare cast doubt on our credentials. We, at the Jamia, are the custodians of our national interests. We are proud to uphold the Nehruvian legacy of pluralism and secularism.

A bare month ago, during the worst days of turmoil in the neighbourhood, I had sent out an appeal to my colleagues and
students. I had written:

These are, doubtless, difficult times for each one of us, but we must stand firm against the attempts to defame and malign our university's reputation. We must maintain the secular and pluralist traditions of the Jamia Millia Islamia and reiterate our commitment to the values enshrined in the Constitution and reflected in the world view of the founders of our institution. I, therefore, appeal to you to exercise restraint and to maintain the dignity that you have so remarkably demonstrated during the last few days. This is, after all, the month of prayer and fasting. We must live up to the moral and ethical precepts of the holy month of Ramazan.

Let me confess that I felt a bit silly writing these lines. Born and brought up in free India, I like many others had come to share the conviction that we belong not to two circles but the one and only Indian circle. I repeat, the Indian circle, the chakra of wholeness and oneness. One of our founders, Maulana Mohamed Ali, had stated long ago:

Where God commands I am a Muslim first, a Muslim second and a Muslim last, and nothing but a Muslim... But where India is concerned, where India's freedom is concerned, I am an Indian first, an Indian second, an Indian last, and nothing but an Indian.

Why, then, are we called upon, time and time again, to undergo a test of loyalty, a trial by fire, after every incident of urban terrorism? Is every other Indian citizen required to do the same? If not -- and I know scores of intellectuals who chose to keep quiet when Gujarat burnt and bled -- why should we pretend to be more loyal than the king? Why should we constantly feel the need to produce certificates of our good citizenship? Of course we condemn terror, which has no sanction in religion, morality and international law. Of course we abhor violence. Of course we shun all forms of lawlessness and disregard for the laws of the land. Piety, devotion and humanity are the essence of our faith. By all means, hang the guilty but please do not terrorize the innocent. Please do not invoke draconian laws that
shackle the blameless in the guise of curbing urban terror. For the sake of God Almighty, do not categorize, define and essentialize the stridency of a few misguided youths. Instead, consider the poise and equanimity of the silent majority who don’t throw bombs at others, who live in peace with their neighbours, who believe in secularism as much as anyone else. Do not malign a university simply because three of its students are allegedly involved in terror activities. Instead, turn to its impeccable record as the beating heart of Indian nationalism. Gandhi had said for the Jamia on 5 January 1939:

It seems to be the only institution manned by Muslims which has self-sacrificing workers who are staunch Muslims and equally staunch nationalists.

Why raise the finger of accusation at us, regardless of whether one of us is an atheist or a believer, a secularist or an Islamist, a Marxist or a Congressman? Why should the editor of a national newspaper let loose his ideologically misguided and grossly misinformed storm-troopers on our institution? What have we done to deserve this after more than six decades of independence? Did the architects of Jamia help to partition India? No, they did not. Did the Jamia bradari contribute to the growing sectarianism in different parts of the country? No, most emphatically not. Have we been instigating caste/class violence in different communally-charged pockets? If not, [Phir yeh hangama ki khuda kya hai?] Why target our small but compact institution? Why tarnish us with a black tar that will take us years, if not decades, to wash away? Already, our students are being denied jobs because Jamia is supposedly the breeding ground of terrorism. Cab drivers warn their passengers not to enter the premises. Delivery vans and service providers baulk at entering our neighbourhood. Is this the price we must pay for being the chief protagonist of pluralism and secular nationhood? [Ab kahan jayega sailab-e-bala mere haad?] Where will this madness end? How far will it drag us in the mire? Does it behave the Vice Chancellor of a University to lead peace marches? Or plaster the walls of the city with posters to declaim our commitment to peace? Does one do this out of
choice? No, but as some might say, dire situations call for drastic measures.

Where are the great leaders of the nation when all this was happening? Nobody, except Mrs. Sheila Dikshit, has come forward to provide the healing touch. Nobody has assuaged our feelings. Nobody! During those black days in September, we were left to fend for ourselves, isolated and beleaguered. Was it for us the poet wrote:

I expect fidelity from them
Who know not what fidelity means

Gandhi once told a correspondent why he had stopped talking of aspiring to the age of 125: 'I have lost the hope because of the terrible happenings in the world. I don't want to live in darkness'. One hopes we would overcome the present crisis and the voices of restraint and moderation will be heeded across the country. May be then, we Indians -- Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Sikhs -- can aspire to live for another 125 years! Maybe we can even hope for another Gandhi to be born -- one who will provide solace and succour to all those who need it most.

All said and done, we must not allow detractors to undermine our confidence. We must, in Faiz's immortal words, wear our scars as our badge of courage:

I was the one whose clothes turned red with the blood from the streets;
I wore those stains proudly all the way to my beloved's house.

Yes, indeed, we must fortify our faith in secular democracy, in our judicial system, in a free electronic and print media, and in our fellow citizens who have fought valiantly against obscurantist and strident
 communalists. What is more, we must fight for our legitimate rights guaranteed to us by our Constitution which is the bedrock of our democracy. We must act in unison with others and make it known. Indeed, as Ghalib had exhorted us:

 Silence and servility to political regimes will be construed as capitulation to the forces of reaction and bigotry. Let us not do so. Instead, in the words of Iqbal:

 Emerge from the confines of the khanaqahs and re-enact the example set by [Imam] Husain.

 While forging a liberal and secular front, it is important to abandon once and for all the language of jehad and to strengthen, within the liberal/secular paradigm, multiculturalism and composite living. To counter majoritarianism, we must be wedded to a liberal, rational and tolerant perspective. This, if you like, is my idea of jehad-i-Akbar. The tyranny of tradition will not do. Social conservatism and religious puritanism will not serve any purpose either.

 We must not allow Jami's historic role, as envisaged by its founders, to be lost in the mists of history. Do not despair; there is light at the end of the tunnel. Let that light reveal us to each other who journey on the same path. In 1921, Gandhi's message to the Muslims was: They must not be irritated by the acts of irresponsible or ignorant but fanatical Hindus. He who exercises restraint under provocation wins the battle. Let them know and feel sure that responsible Hindus are not on their side in their trial in any bargaining spirit... for they are even as blood brothers, born of the same mother.

 The relevance of this message must not be lost on us. Friends, let us be the prime embodiments of freedom, tolerance, pluralism, and academic excellence, and a key constituent in the formation of civil society.
While acknowledging the expansive vision of Jamia's founding fathers, let us not lose sight of its immediate location in the present. Let us anticipate the future, one that includes the contribution of Jamia's students and teachers. In a small way, we have tried putting these ideas into practice not merely by commemorating our leaders and thinkers through memorial lectures and professorial chairs but by creating a genuine forum for interaction with scholars from across the country and overseas to discover a common fellowship. I believe we, at the Jamia, are at the threshold of destiny, waiting to play a bigger and far more substantial role in the national and international arena. But for us to partake of our destiny, not partly but in full and ample measure, we must set ourselves certain measurable objectives.

First and foremost, let us adopt a balanced and critical approach in these unsettling times. Let us concede that powerful pluralist visions shape the Muslim minority. Let us spell out the Islam’s and modernist movements without prior assumptions. Let us discuss the contested terrain of who represents Muslims in state and society, the nature of political and religious leadership, and the leadership's ability to connect with the varied experiences of Muslim societies. Religious minorities must not be spurned; they deserve, as Ghandhiji and Jawaharlal Nehru used to say, a dignified place under the sun.

Let us also recognize the emergence of a trans-national community, a new phenomenon of increasing importance. Let us remember that its social and economic profile is different from the previous unwieldy coalition of Islamist formations. It is upwardly mobile, self-confident, and in tune with the changes ushered in by globalization. Although this constituency carries some of the baggage from the past, its members mostly draw upon the range of contemporary experiences from not one but different locations. Why, they ask, are their co-religionists victimized in Bosnia, Somalia, Chechnya, Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq? [Why must it be my nest where the lightning struck yesterday?] These sites confirm their belief that
something is fundamentally wrong with the world they live in. It is this contemporary reality that contributes to the Muslim rage.

Ghalib had asked:

Why these fragrant locks, coil upon coil?
What lies behind these surma-filled glances?
Where have this verdure and bloom come from?
What is a rain-filled cloud, what is the wind?

Those who ask questions, those who push the limits of the known, those who nurture the spirit of enquiry are the ones who shape the destiny of the nation. It is in recognition of this fact that we take great pride in conferring degrees on Ms. Shabana Azmi, Mr. Asghar Ali Engineer, Mr. Naseeruddin Shah, and Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan. We feel privileged to honour them and to have them in our midst today. The degree is a mere gesture of our appreciation of their significant role in the making of a vibrant India and the preservation of its composite character. Each one of them has, in his and her unique way, created mirrors through which we see ourselves and windows through which we perceive reality. It is these mirrors and windows that define the boundaries of ideas and institutions in our society.

Now let me, very briefly, place on record what we have done during the past year. Over the last four years, we have established 16 research/teaching centres. We hope these centres shall help in integrating knowledge from diverse sources and embrace compassion and wisdom from our pluralist traditions.

Thanks to the generous support of Mr. Arjun Singh, the Minister of Human Resource Development, we have spent well over Rs. 148.39 crore under the Xth Plan budget developing our otherwise
poor infrastructure. Our Non-Plan budget has increased from Rs. 47.23 crore in 2004 to approximately Rs. 135 crore. Our teaching strength has increased from 614 to 750; and our student body from 13,026 to 16,941 over the last four years.

The Dental College, constructed at a cost of Rs. 46 crore, is our prized trophy. The Castro Café and the M. F. Husain Art Gallery have enhanced the beauty of our landscape. The newly-built six-storied Dr. Zakir Husain Library is a fine specimen of architecture. The Child Development Centre, built on the strength of a donation from Mr. Taiyoon Khorakiwala, illustrates our commitment to the weak and underprivileged sections of society. A new Day Care Centre and enhanced Medical Centre will take care of the medical needs of our students, teachers, and administrative staff. The Museum of Independence is a unique venture that will cost Rs. 60 crore. The Museum, the first of its kind in the country, is a Jamia project, to be built on Jamia land, and managed by the Jamia authorities. Thanks to our chief benefactor Mr. Arjun Singh, the Museum will portray Jamia’s role in the anti-colonial struggle and provide a space for the lesser-known voices.

Many new facilities have been built at a cost of Rs. 116 crore and many more building projects are nearing completion. For this much credit goes to the dedication of the Civil and Electrical Engineers and their colleagues. I need to thank a great many people—students, teachers and members of the administrative staff—for their affection and understanding. The former and present Registrar, the Finance Officer, Deans of Faculties, the Dean Students’ Welfare, the Librarian and her staff, the Heads of Departments, and the Media Coordinator have lent their ungrudging support to all my initiatives. And, last but not the least, the Chancellor has shown a great deal of interest in Jamia’s ‘new’ incarnation. He is a man of wisdom and sagacity. We miss him on this occasion.

We are indebted to the Minister of Human Resource Development for his patronage and his Secretary, Mr. R. P. Agarwal. Mr. Sunil Kumar has guided us on many matters. Prof. S. K. Thorat, Chairman, University Grants Commission, has lent his ungrudging support to our projects. I hope he will open his
money bags for Jamia’s future development project.

In developing a new space for Jamia, we have had to replace older buildings with new ones—a decision that is always fraught with meanings and consequences. Space and its organization is associated with memory and a sense of heritage, which is not always easy to disavow or disengage from. Yet, it is important to move beyond memory and embark on a journey that does not only reify old images and enduring impressions but enables us to see things afresh and acquire the much needed perspective to locate ourselves, our dreams, and aspirations and responsibilities within the axis of the present. It is in deference to the brimful potential of the present and our enormous responsibilities for the future that we have undertaken an ambitious building programme that is as material as it is symbolic. Breathing new life into store, designing new architectures of imagination, naming the buildings, parks and gates in the way we have will, we do believe, inspire us to search within ourselves and to look for that moment of pure joy that comes when we break free from the thrall of dead habit and habitual thinking that clouds our sense of the present.

The task of building is never easy but it has moments of exhilaration when we actually come face to face with new spaces be they built up or open—in parks and classrooms, centers, and auditoriums, cafes and conference rooms.

Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to Zakir Husain on 10 September 1946: May the Jamia flourish, ever keeping its ideals before it, and go on producing men of worth who will be true and worthy children of India and who, by their service of the people, will help to raise them to higher levels.

In the end, Ladies and Gentlemen, I cannot resist quoting these lines from Iqbal:

آی کی نہ گُنگاں کی نریں دیکھیں

Too long has lain deserted the heart’s warm habitation
Come, let us build here in our homeland an altar’s new foundation