



STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

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No. 54/15 - An Address by the Prime Minister, Mr. St. Laurent
at the Convocation of Delhi
University February 24, 1954

I appreciate very much the honour which Delhi University has today bestowed on me. I am proud indeed to have been admitted to the distinguished company of your graduates and scholars. I realize that this honour comes to me because of the position I hold in the government of my country and that it is a gesture of good-will and friendship to the people of Canada. I am nonetheless happy and grateful that I should be the person to whom this gesture is addressed.

Although Delhi University is not as old as some universities in India, I know something of the splendid work it is doing for India's young men and women in the humanities and the sciences and in preparing them to take a significant part in the building of the new India. We in Canada are already acquainted with many of your students whom it has been our pleasure to welcome at our universities.

It has indeed been a signal honour for me to have received this degree from the hands of the Vice-President of India, your revered Chancellor. We are all greatly indebted to Dr. Radhakrishnan for his eminent scholarship, for his splendid work in making the philosophies and religions of the East better known in western countries, and for his original contributions to modern philosophical thought. His leadership in UNESCO and his distinguished public service to India in recent years are well known to Canadians, many of whom had the privilege of meeting him and hearing him speak when he visited Canada last year, and many more are looking forward to a series of lectures which he has kindly consented to give at McGill University in Montreal next autumn.

I am also deeply honoured by the presence here today of your learned Pro-Chancellor, the former Chief Justice of India. I appreciate greatly Mr. Sastri's courtesy in making a special visit here from Madras to attend this ceremony.

I am conscious today of the vast cultural heritage of this ancient land. I recall, for example, that more than four thousand years ago there was a remarkable valley civilization on this sub-continent. I also recall that some of the technical concepts on which Western science and Western thought patterns are based, such as the so-called Arabic system of numerals, had their origins in India. It was India, too, that gave birth to two of the great religions of the world, Hinduism and Buddhism, and the imposing moral philosophies which emanated from them.

The achievements of your people in the realm of art alone from Harappa and Mohenjo Daro to the sumptuous beauty of Mogul architecture have assured India a permanent place among the great civilisations of the world. I have already seen a few examples of this art in your capital city and, I am glad to say, I will see more during my visit to other parts of your country.

In this University, where Hindus, Muslims and Christians and the members of other religions all study together, I am reminded of the long tradition of religious toleration in India. I am told that about fifteen hundred years ago India gave refuge to Jews who fled from Babylon, and that the ancient Christian church in South India also goes back to the first centuries of the Christian era. The ideals of religious freedom embodied in your constitution clearly show that you do not forget the lesson of your long history that only through the practice of mutual toleration can men of different faiths live happily together and each make their most fruitful contribution to the well-being of the nation.

This attitude of tolerance, or to put it more positively, the effort to co-operate actively with others different from ourselves, seems to have been recognized as of the greatest importance during all periods of Indian history. This is true not only of persons of different religions but also of persons who are of different races or who speak different languages or whose customs and traditions distinguish them from the majority of the population.

How else but through tolerance could unity be achieved in a country so vast, so complex and so diverse in its natural surroundings? For in spite of the differences and contrasts which are so marked in India, I know that there is something essentially and demonstrably Indian, a heritage that belongs to all of your people.

This situation reminds me of my own country. Canada is a very new land compared with yours, but like yours it is of great size and like yours it stretches to the sea in three of the four directions of the compass. Over the doors of our Houses of Parliament is written: "The wholesome sea is at her gates -- her gates both east and west." Although a large part of Canada is still uninhabited, our people, like yours, are spread over widely different geographical regions and live under many different conditions. We, too, have our mountains and our plains, our rivers and our forests, our countryside and our villages and towns. And, we, too have a climate which has been a challenge to human perseverance and ingenuity.

But there are similarities which are more deep-rooted. Like you, we have built our national unity on co-operation among people with various racial, linguistic and religious backgrounds. We Canadians may be of English, Irish, Scottish, French, German, Italian, Ukrainian or other European origin, or from India or Pakistan or China or Japan, but we are all, above all, Canadians. Each group makes its own characteristic contribution to the culture of the whole, and so we achieve something of that unity in diversity which is the essential ingredient of nationhood and out of which ultimately, I hope, world brotherhood can grow.

Just as you have a long cultural tradition so we, too, are able to trace our way of life back through many centuries although we have to leave Canadian soil to reach the sources of our tradition. Our cultural heritage derives from Greece and Rome and Palestine. It was enriched and transmitted to us by the successor cultures of Europe, and finally fashioned by ourselves to fit our own way of life in Canada and our needs and ideas.

Dr. Radhakrishnan wrote in his penetrating book, "Eastern Religious and Western Thought", "No culture, no country, lives or has a right to live for itself. If it has any contribution to make toward the enrichment of the human spirit, it owes that contribution to the widest circle it can reach". I think it is a splendid thing that our two countries, the one young, the other old, can join together at this time in each making its own particular contribution to the building of a better world.

I think, too, that it is gratifying that the people of India and the people of the West can see the best that is in each other, and that they realize that we are all human beings essentially equal in every respect.

I would like to repeat on this occasion what I said to your Prime Minister when he visited us in Ottawa in 1949. I told him then that we hoped and trusted that, even though the Indian people had had many more centuries of social experience and civilization, there would never be any indication by them that they looked down upon us as their inferiors. I said that we also hoped and trusted that, in spite of the rapid development of our industrial processes and industrial know-how, there would never be any feeling among the people of India that, because of this, we thought ourselves to be in any way superior as human beings to the millions who inhabit your country.

I thank you for the opportunity you have given me to come and say this to you today, and I thank you again for the great honour you have conferred upon me.

S/C