

SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE AT THE ARJUN SINGH MEMORIAL LECTURE

Nehru Memorial Museum, New Delhi: Apr 9, 2016

1. I consider it my privilege to be present here today and deliver the Keynote Address in memory of Late Shri Arjun Singh, who was a great leader of our nation, and a passionate arbiter of the common man. To begin with, let me thank The Arjun Singh Sadbhavna Foundation and the Madhya Pradesh Foundation for organizing this Lecture in remembrance of a person who stood for the poor and the downtrodden; the backward and the underprivileged.
2. On his demise in March 2011, Arjun Singhji left behind a rich legacy of administrative acumen, political statesmanship and a lifetime spent in championing the cause of weaker sections. To carry forward the ideals for which Late Shri Arjun Singhji lived, an institution in the form of The Arjun Singh Sadbhavana Foundation was set up in February this year. I am told that the main objective of this trust is to work for the weaker sections of society and for women empowerment. It will undertake activities for the upliftment of the poor and needy, using education as the primary tool of development. It is heartening to find amongst its trustees distinguished leaders in public life who have had long years of association with Arjun Singhji. I, too, had the good fortune of having been associated with him. He was my esteemed colleague of more than four decades in public life, in various governments and outside.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

3. Late Arjun Singhji had an enviable political career spanning over five decades. He first became a member of the State Legislative Assembly in 1957 and remained so for the next twenty eight years. He served as Minister in the State for several years with different portfolios including Education. He became the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh in 1980 after the Assembly elections in which the Congress Party secured an absolute majority. Thus, Arjun Singhji rose from the ranks of the Party to claim the top position in the State. He quickly made a mark as a deft administrator. As the Chief Minister from 1980 to 1985, he initiated various schemes for the welfare of the marginalized and started many projects for the all round development of the State.

4. Though elected as the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh again in 1985, he resigned from that position. He became the Governor of Punjab in March 1985. During his tenure, Arjun Singhji restored peace and harmony in the state of Punjab. He remained Governor till November 1985, after which he came to Delhi. He was elected to the Eighth Lok Sabha from the South Delhi Constituency and was sworn in as the Commerce Minister. He later served as the Minister of Communications from October 1986 to February 1988. Thereafter, he again became the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh for about a year in 1988-89.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

5. Late Arjun Singhji played a crucial role at the national level. After being elected to the Tenth Lok Sabha in 1991, Arjun Singhji served in the Narasimha Rao Cabinet for over three years as the Minister of Human Resource Development. Subsequently, he was elected to the Rajya Sabha twice, in the year 2000 and in 2006. He again became the Human Resource Development Minister in the Dr. Manmohan Singh Cabinet, which he served with distinction for five years from 2004 to 2009. With over eight years, Arjun Singh ji perhaps had the longest tenure as Human Resource Development Minister after Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. The education landscape in our country naturally had a considerable imprint of the policies that Arjun Singhji had pursued.
6. The higher education sector was marked by rapid expansion during his term as Human Resource Development Minister. The proposals for the Eleventh Five Year Plan resulted in a significant rise in the number of central institutions of higher learning, either through the establishment of new institutes or the up-gradation of existing ones. During the Plan period 2006-07 to 2011-12, the number of central universities increased by 21, IITs by 8, IIMs by 7 and NITs by 10. Today, the number of universities in India are 730 and there are 36000 degree giving colleges.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

7. Unfortunately, the quality of education in most of our institutes is below par. If we delve into our past, we could find renowned seats of higher learning – Nalanda, Takshashila, Vikramashila, Valabhi, Somapura and Odantapuri – that dominated the world higher education system for eighteen hundred years beginning sixth century BC. Scholars from round the globe flocked to these ‘poles of knowledge’. A different scenario is noticeable today. Many meritorious Indian students pursue their higher studies from foreign universities. Nobel laureates – Har Gobind Khorana; Subrahmanyam Chandrasekhar; Dr. Amartya Sen; and Venkatraman Ramakrishnan – did

their graduate or post-graduate studies in Indian universities before they went abroad for higher learning. Since 1930, no scholar from an Indian university has won the Nobel Prize. It is ironical that our higher education system, which is capable of producing world-class scholars, loses them to foreign universities.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

8. None of our universities earlier found a place amongst the top two hundred positions in world university rankings. I have been repeating in my interactions with institutions of higher learning that the rankings process must be accorded due importance. Indeed, IITs and a few other central institutions have started making efforts to present their credentials before the rating agencies in a more systematic manner and with a proactive approach. I am happy that good results have flowed since. Indian institutions – not one but two - have found place for the first time amongst the top 200 universities in the world in rankings by a reputed agency. Two other Indian institutions have been ranked within the top 20 small universities in the world by another international agency. I hope this trend will continue and we will soon attract mighty minds from all over world.
9. To enable Indian institutes of higher learning to emerge as world-class institutions, a National Institutional Ranking Framework has been launched recently. It ranks institutions on parameters covering teaching, learning and resources; research and professional practices; graduation outcomes; outreach and inclusivity; and perception.
10. Indian universities indeed have the potential to be leading institutions in the world if we ensure academic freedom. For that, urgent improvements in academic management are needed. Our institutions must pursue excellence in every sphere of academic activity, be it teaching, evaluation, research or project work. To make learning more effective, teaching pedagogy must be refined, curricula up-dated regularly, an inter-disciplinary approach adopted and evaluation mechanism reformed. Physical infrastructure must be improved. To pursue excellence, core competencies must be identified and centres of excellence nurtured. To create quality consciousness, every institution must be benchmarked and accredited.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

11. A healthy interface with the industry can benefit higher educational institutions in terms of: involvement of industry personnel in curriculum design and project guidance; sponsorship of chair positions; and setting up

of incubation centres and laboratories. Setting up industry-interface cell can accelerate these activities.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

12. Research and innovation are the keystones for widening the country's production potential. Our future growth will result not so much from the utilization of our resources with existing technology than from its better usage through more advanced technology. Unfortunately, investment in research in our country is lacking. R&D expenditure as percentage of GDP is a mere 0.8 percent in India. Compared to that, it is 3.6 percent in Japan, 2.7 percent in the US and 2.0 percent in China. Higher academic and research institutions must be the hotbeds of research activity. Building a sound research eco-system calls for a slew of measures like collaborative partnerships and better financial incentives for attracting and retaining research talent. To imbibe a scientific temper and a spirit of inquiry in students, research at the under-graduate level must be promoted.
13. A country like India needs innovative solutions to issues in renewable energy, climate change, drinking water, sanitation and urbanization. These developmental challenges call for an inspired response from the higher education system. The IMPRINT India programme - a Pan IIT and IISc initiative – launched in November last year has identified ten themes that will link the research done by institutes of national importance with the immediate requirements of the society.
14. The role of educational institutions goes beyond mere pedagogy and classrooms. It is incumbent on them to mould students into responsible human beings. They have to instill in the students the civilizational values of love for motherland; performance of duty; compassion for all; tolerance for pluralism; respect for women; honesty in life; self-restraint in conduct; responsibility in action; and discipline.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

15. In a pluralistic democracy, it is important that the values of tolerance, respect for contrary views and patience are inculcated amongst the citizens particularly the youth. Pluralism and tolerance have been the hallmark of our civilization. This is a core philosophy that must continue undeterred. For, India's strength lies in her diversity.
16. India is a multi-faceted nation of 1.3 billion people, 122 languages, 1600 dialects and 7 religions. In the words of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru which I

quote: *"It is a country held together by strong but invisible threads"* (unquote). Diversity of our country is a fact. This cannot be turned into fiction due to the whims and caprices of few individuals. Plurality of our society has come about through assimilation of ideas over centuries. The multiplicity in culture, faith and language is what makes India special. We derive our strength from tolerance. It has been part of our collective consciousness for centuries. It has worked well for us and it is the only way it will work for us. There are divergent strands in public discourse. We may argue. We may not agree. But we cannot deny the essential prevalence of multiplicity of opinion. Otherwise, a fundamental character of our thought process will wither away.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

17. Gandhiji had said and I quote: *"Religion is a force for unity; we cannot make it a cause of conflict"* (unquote). The harmony of faiths in India stands out as an important moral example in a world where several regions have been torn apart by sectarian conflicts. We must continue to lead by example. We must work towards maintaining the continuing goodwill amongst different communities. At times, communal harmony will be put to test by vested interests. We must therefore remain alert to communal tensions rearing its ugly head anywhere. Rule of Law must form the sole basis for dealing with any challenging situation. It is our democratic underpinning that must prevail at all times.
18. Democracy is not all about numbers but also calls for consensus building. A phenomenon seen in recent times is the way the common man is engaged with affairs of the nation. While we must wield no space to anarchy, efficient democratic machinery must have the means and wherewithal to absorb public opinion for formulation of sound policies.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

19. Late Arjun Singhji was one leader whose heart and mind was rooted to the ground. He never lost his simplicity to power, nor did he lose his concern for the common man. He dedicated himself to the building of a strong nation based on the values of secularism and democracy which he dearly cherished. He held important positions in the Congress Party and was an able political organizer. He had a deep understanding of political issues and their undercurrents, which was an asset while dealing with any political situation.
20. I hope the Foundation set up to commemorate Shri Arjun Singhji will strive to take forward the causes he espoused, and live up to his cherished

ideals. This would be the most fitting tribute to his work. I compliment Shrimati Arjun Singh (Saroj Kumari) for taking this initiative. My good wishes to the family and well wishers involved in setting up the Foundation!

Thank you.
Jai Hind.
