

Madhavrao Scindia Memorial Lecture



by

**Her Excellency President
Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga**

April 23, 2002

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I am deeply honoured to have been invited to deliver the first Madhavrao Scindia Memorial Lecture. This lecture is my tribute to a man whose values I share, whose vision of politics as a commitment to the welfare of people is my own, whose belief that no effort must be spared to encourage, protect and strengthen liberal demonstration and secular values in a pluralist State, I emphasize and commend to all our peoples who have the privilege of living in this great region of the world.

At the time of his death, Madhavrao Scindia was General Secretary of the Congress Party and Deputy Leader of the Opposition. He had won every one of the nine elections he had contested in thirty years. As Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's Minister of State for Railways he was universally credited with the outstanding success of modernizing the Railway system of India by the computerization of all its operations and the acquisition of new and faster trains. His untimely death was undoubtedly a loss to the Congress; but it was very much more than that - Scindia's death was a loss to the polity itself, especially in these distressing times when a dismal mixture of mediocrity and manipulative dexterity seems essential for political success. Scindia represented a rapidly vanishing face of South-Asian politics. He was sophisticated, cosmopolitan, dignified, hard-working, liberal and unquestionably committed to pluralism. He was instinctively secular and unhesitatingly anchored to the belief that India must have a pluralist polity. As a distinguished Indian writer has said, and I would like, if I may, to make her words my own. I quote "The life of Madhavrao Scindia with all its triumphs and tribulations as he made his arduous journey from being a maharaja to an enthusiastic and committed citizen of the republic, ceaselessly casting his energies into the practice of democratic politics, unswerving in his belief that India's future lay in embracing modernity without jettisoning pluralism and the commitment to address the sharp social and economic inequalities is an inspiring example of democratic India at its best." Unquote.

Building a Pluralistic Society - Managing Change & Diversity

I speak to you today at a momentous period of human history, when Humankind has traversed two millennia and arrived at the third, hopefully moving forward. The last century of the second millennium has seen many radical changes:

1. Politically - the process of de-colonization and the end of colonial domination of one nation by another, led to the subsequent emergence of independent Nation-States.
2. Economically - for the first time in human history, the 20th century experienced the spread of a single economic system throughout the globe, spreading into Nations with diverse, socio-political organisations and even more diverse cultural practices.
3. Thirdly, we have seen the continuous rise of movements of various political, ethnic and religious groups within Nations, demanding expression of their own specific identities, often with the use of violent means and at times with the demand for separate States.
4. Fourthly, we have seen a quasi-total breakdown of accepted traditional, spiritual and moral value-systems with their connected social and cultural practices. The increasing isolation of the individual from his collective group, consequent to the spread of the value-systems specific to the free market economy, has given rise to a situation where the individual seeks solace, not in spiritual or human relationships, but in the spiral of blind consumerism and in excessive indulgence in drugs, alcohol, tobacco, carnal pleasures and alas the unrestrained expression of violence.

With the birth of new, independent Nation-States, diverse hopes and aspirations were generated, in the various communities

and groups of peoples inhabiting these States. Different communities, even though living within one State, had experienced differing types of social and cultural practices and even different sub-economic systems. It is natural that the expectations and aspirations of each of these groups would differ somewhat from each other.

An effective vision was required to weld together the separate sets of aspirations into one collective, national dream, composed of the multi-faceted aspirations of each community, living freely and proudly with its own separate identity, which could co-exist symbiotically with the other entities, to compose a harmonious and united entirety - the Nation-State, a strong and stable one.

The lack of such a vision and the failure to build such Nations, has caused the majority community in many countries to attempt to establish hegemonistic and exclusivist regimes, in order to arrogate to itself a disproportionate share of political and economic power. This in turn has given rise to movements of minority groups attempting to enforce, often by violent means, their own specific identities, expressed in various forms, such as the demand for separate states.

The challenge of the 21st century for many countries and quite certainly for South Asia, would remain the enterprise of building pluralist, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Nation-States. For this we would certainly have to manage the existing diversity within our nations and direct the richness of this diversity towards positive change, whilst controlling and finally eliminating the conflicts generated by diversity.

The failure to have achieved this during the course of the 20th century has resulted in conflicts of the most horrifying violence, on a scale hitherto unknown in human history. Here I speak of the post World War II era which is our period of history,

the period in which most of us here have grown up. During this period, insurrection in its ultimate form - Terrorism - has come to establish itself as a political strategy, commonly used by groups challenging the authority of the state. No doubt there were rare instances of acts of terrorism employed previously. The assassination of the Austrian Crown Prince in Bosnia - Herzegovina by a terrorist, is said to have triggered the First World War. We know of several groups of anarchists who have employed terrorist tactics at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, in Russia and in some countries of Western Europe.

During the second half of the 20th century international conflicts between States, as well as the Cold War, had ended, giving way to intra-national conflicts within Nations. These first took the form of revolutionary or insurrectionary movements and have now been transformed into guerrilla type terrorist organizations.

Terrorism became the most unnatural, dehumanizing and politically destabilizing phenomenon of the 20th century.

The goals of terrorism differ somewhat from those of revolutionary movements. Revolution seeks to effect radical changes in the social and economic structures of the country and also in its power structures. They enunciate a new vision and programmes of action. Terrorist movements are neither radical nor revolutionary. They are destructive and stem usually from conservatism and revenge. Terrorism seems to have become endemic to modern society. It continues to be generated by recurrent social crises, arising from the increasing marginalisation of some sections of society caused by the indiscriminate spread of capitalism and the free market economy, through the much vaunted process of globalisation.

It is said that this modern phenomenon of terrorist movements is born out of frustration and despair. Despair caused

by social marginalisation, economic decline and political defeat. Someone once said, "Young hope betrayed, transforms itself into bombs". Perceived injustice if allowed to continue unresolved, will also transform itself into despair and then violence. Leon Trotsky once described the two emotions central to terrorism as being despair and vengeance.

The betrayed hopes one talks of are, as we are aware, the hopes of diverse communities to obtain their fair share of the cake.

At this point it would be useful to remind ourselves that it is not terrorism nor terrorists who divided Ireland nor caused the Israel Palestinian problem 50 years ago. They did not impose white rule in South Africa, nor did the terrorists overthrow the duly elected government of Salvador Allende in Chile. The terrorists did not separate India and Pakistan. To come closer home, neither did the armed Tamil militants create the circumstances for the marginalisation of the minority communities of Sri Lanka.

It is perceived injustice that has engendered violent or terroristic responses from those who feel victims of that injustice.

It has been said that violence - social, political or physical, perpetrated by the State or the agents of the State against other States or its own peoples is the womb of terrorism, humiliation its cradle and continued revenge by the State the mother's milk and nourishment for terrorism.

Today, there is a desperate need to study and understand the deep-rooted causes that divide groups of people who inhabit the same land and form one Nation. The causes of these conflicts and the form they take, whether it be terrorism or otherwise, must be studied and understood in a scientific and objective manner.

I have no doubt you would agree that the governments and peoples of South Asia need to engage urgently in this exercise. South Asia has failed to emerge, even after half a century of independence, from cataclysmic intra-national divisions and conflicts. The persistent assertion of emotional attachment to traditional beliefs may prove unhelpful in the present context. We may have to shed some of our traditional sectarian attitudes, in order to manage the changes that have propelled us at extraordinary velocity, into the modern world. New value systems, accompanied by new attitudes and new systems of managing change, would have to be formulated and adopted, if we are to cope with and benefit from the marvels of modern science and technology.

The 20th century has rightly been called the age of extremes. That century which has been our century, the century of our generation, has in a mere fifty years, propelled the world into new situations which at other periods of human history took several centuries to unfold. We South Asians who can boast of a history and a great civilization that goes back several millennia and even further into the mists of time, now find ourselves in Alice's cave, in a modern wonderland, entirely alien to the one we have known. What do we do? Do we run away from it? or should we take proper stock of the situation and adopt what is good in it, for the benefit of our peoples, whilst rejecting whatever appears to be disadvantageous. I must hasten to add here, that when taking stock, it is crucial that we shed time-worn attitudes and acquire a freshness of mind and spirit, together with the realization that however great and precious our heritage may be, there is a time when the old world must give way to the new. This process will not be without pain, but it is a pain that must be endured if old nations are to achieve the new greatness that they deserve to achieve and have the ability and the strength to achieve.

May I venture to say that the two major factors that have bedevilled South Asia, and many other Nations since independence from colonial rule or the disintegration of the Socialist bloc are;

1. The failure to build a strong and stable, pluralist society, where due recognition and power would be accorded to the specific needs of the diverse communities and groups which comprise these Nation-States,
2. The failure of the State to emerge from economic poverty and lead their peoples towards the dream of a fully developed society.

I need hardly mention that one is intrinsically linked to the other. The resolution of the problem requires first, a clear political decision and a political will and then scientific, objective programmes of action. This would, of course, require visionary leaders, with the ability to manage both these operations efficiently. This is not to say that successive governments of our region have not attempted to achieve these goals. Yet, for various reasons we have not been able to complete the process.

The policy of the colonial rulers to "divide and rule" consisted of promoting and according wealth and privilege to selected groups of the local population, which were encouraged to develop into an elite class owing allegiance to the colonial rulers. The vast majority of the people stood apart from this process, seeing themselves dispossessed of their traditional means of livelihood and increasingly marginalized.

The seething frustrations caused by such situations have found expression in numerous ways, often violent. The search by the newly independent Nation-State for a separate and specific national identity had, at times, not paid sufficient attention to the aspirations of the diverse, ethno-religious and cultural entities living within the State. While the Nation as a whole engaged itself in the enterprise of constructing its new identity, some communities within the Nation commenced their own struggles, to seek what they believed should be their separate identity. In most countries

troubled by armed conflict and terrorism presently, the demand is invariably for recognition of a specific ethnic or religious identity, often clothed in the trappings of a separate State.

At this point of time, States and Governments must begin to address these demands and their just causes and find solutions. The delay in doing this, and at times the refusal to do so, often with the use of force by the State, has led to the continuing tragedy of armed conflict, which we experience in our region. However, the levels of violence and terror used by armed movements are often not justified by the injustices caused to innocent people. The tactics of terror and murder employed by terrorist movements cannot and should not be condoned by any human being. They should certainly not be tolerated by any State or Government. The strictest action must be taken efficiently and expeditiously, against all movements and individuals participating in or condoning terrorism as a political strategy. But the causes that have generated such movements must be addressed.

The present thinking on terrorism can be divided into two schools of thought. One school of thought places the terrorist beyond the pale of civilized society and considers him anathema to civilization and stigmatizes him as a plain murderer who needs to be eliminated.

The second school of thought encourages an in-depth study of, and a systematic approach to understand and eradicate, the reasons that bring about such upheavals. The rational political, social and economic aspirations of peoples which when frustrated continuously give rise to full blown terrorism of the modern day, must be sifted out of the process of terroristic actions and looked at separately. Those political aspirations must be addressed honestly and seriously. The solutions that are employed must be made effective-legally and constitutionally, politically, economically and socially.

Peace is more than the simple absence of war. It entails active engagement in the battle for identifying and rectifying the root causes of conflict.

I believe honestly and strongly that the most effective response to conflict and terrorism is to root out the causes that generate them. Oppression of one State by another, or of various communities within its territory by the State, through the abuse or misuse of power, has proved to be the font of discontent, despair and violence. Modern technology has effectively encouraged the spread of discontent to every nook and corner of Nation-States and across national boundaries throughout the globe. Socio-political discontent refuses to be contained within little compartments. The most startling realization of the potency of modern technology and the reach it permits the terrorist, came to the entire world on the 11th of September last year, during the terrorist attacks on the world's most powerful Nation - the United States of America. The numerous terrorist attacks perpetrated in all of the South Asian States, as well as innumerable other developing countries, went almost unnoticed by the world until 11th September 2001. Be that as it may, the world has woken up even at this late stage to the problem of terrorism and the dangers it poses to all that is just and decent, to all that humanity has built up through the centuries to be respected and cherished.

It is even more urgent for us in South Asia to address this problem in its entirety. We are reaping today the fruits, the bitter fruits, of that tragedy of believing that some people and some Nations could exclusively apportion to themselves the enjoyment of the profits of modern science and technology generated through modern capitalism. Some of us were in too much of a hurry to reap the benefits only for ourselves.

We forgot to be humane in the process. We forgot that there were others who were also waiting on the sidelines, to share the fruits of development, others who had hugely contributed to

this development, in raw materials and natural resources and manpower. It is still not too late, to undertake or complete the process of building pluralistic nations based on social and economic equality and power sharing.

It is now time for the richer developed nations to give of their technology, of their knowledge and to give generously of their monies, not only to obtain contracts for companies in their countries, but also to understand and alleviate the problems generated by the spread of globalised markets.

The gradual emergence of the common masses from colonial or feudal oppression brought to center-stage religion and religious traditions, which constituted the popular conscience of populations in traditional societies. Religious "fundamentalism" as it became familiarly labelled, has offered, in some nations, stability, a less complex and a more comprehensive social system for the vast majority of the masses in the less developed Nations. At the same time there flourished on the ruins of the old institutional ideologies, the theology of identity politics. The right to "national self-determination" for supposedly homogenous ethnic – linguistic - cultural communities has developed to the savage and tragic absurdity, which we experience today, in the demands of separatist movements. The theory of the "right of self-determination" has been publicly abandoned by most rational observers. The resentment generated between the two World Wars gave rise to fascism. The ethno-religio-political protest of the oppressed of the Third World, arising from the hunger for a social identity and a stable and just social order in a disintegrating world gave rise to the struggle for separate States for every different ethno-religious community. However these movements are no more likely to produce solutions for the disease for which they Purport to be the cure, than fascism was able to produce for the crises of the inter World War periods.

The refusal by hegemonistic States to recognize the justice and, legitimacy of the demand of some of the

communities living within the State is the one single major cause of ethno-religious conflict within States in modern times. There is an urgent need to resolve the contradictions that have arisen between the State and the nationalist consciousness of diverse communities living within the State.

In order to do this, we must first revolutionize the "minds and hearts" of our governments, leaders of society and the masses. We must learn decisively that if we are to build strong and stable Nations, we have to seek alternatives to the monolithic unitary concept of State sovereignty and to blend power with principle, to reconcile authority with freedom.

A possible compromise which would satisfy the aspirations of all groups could be a devolution of power, where power is shared extensively between the Central Government and the regional authorities, without leading to the dismemberment of the State.

A high level of democratic participation and decision making, law making and governance by the regional authorities could give satisfaction to social groups, hitherto deprived of equal rights and subjected to denial and state oppression.

To achieve all this we must learn to draw strength from the richness of diversities, rather than reject that which is different thus, exacerbating diversity into conflict.

If I may allude to a few examples that are relevant to us - you have in India made a serious attempt at building a pluralist and non-sectarian society since independence. The Constitution of India intrinsically recognises the diversity of the numerous ethno-religious and cultural groups of peoples living in India, while according to them the legal and political authority to maintain that diversity within the united yet Federal State of India. We know that this is the strength of modern India, which by any

definition is not simply a country but almost a whole sub-continent. India has managed to cope with the myriad diversities within it, while maintaining a sufficiently stable political system. It continues to be one of the world's most vibrant democracies. The uprisings that occur, and the rumblings that one hears from some of the numerous communities living in the Federal State of India are caused by some delays in implementing the rights and privileges given to each one of those groups by the Constitution.

In Sri Lanka, we have faltered in the essential task of nation-building since independence. With much less diversity of race, religion and language than you have, we have failed to address the issue of building a truly pluralist Nation State. You are aware of the horrendous consequences of this neglect - the rise of the armed struggle of one of the minority communities in my country, which has grown into the most ruthless armed conflict seen anywhere in the world, in our times.

South-Asia today is driven by perhaps more armed conflicts than any other region in the world. Everyone of the seven States of our region excepting the Maldives, is facing challenges from armed, militant groups. The Al-Qaeda operate and are headquartered in South-Asia. The world's two most dangerous and ruthlessly efficient terrorist organisations were born, nurtured and operate in South-Asia - i.e. the Al-Qaeda and the LTTE. Is it not time that we stand up and ring loud the alarm bells? But that will not suffice.

Could we not;

Firstly, set up independent, non-political national institutions with the constitutional authority to study and formulate every aspect of a national policy for a pluralist society. This-would have to englobe the socioeconomic, cultural and politico-legal aspects of the problems of the minorities.

Secondly, create an authoritative, independent institution for conflict resolution, in each of our countries. It is essential that both these institutions obtain the widest possible participation of the body politic and opinion makers in every field of society. This would presuppose that governments will have to stop thinking, at least momentarily, of the number of votes they could collect, and instead have the courage and foresight to do what is desperately and urgently required, if we are to turn away from the brink of disaster and travel along the path of enlightenment and progress.

South Asia is home to four of the world's great religions. Their ennobling spirituality should lift us beyond petty, man-made differences such as race, language and traditional practices into realms that seek out the nobility and goodness of Man and his innate greatness.

I know that we, South Asians, possess the courage, fortitude, vision and spirituality to reach for the stars. Let us resolve to do so, individually, nationally and regionally. As we march into the new millennium, may I propose, together with Bharath's great thinker and poet Rabindranath Tagore, that we let our countries awake truly and fully "into that heaven of Freedom" - freedom from the shackles of bigotry and jealousy, and liberate the forces of unity and harmony in diversity.

REFERENCE

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