

SONIA GANDHI

## Valedictory Address\*

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

It is indeed a great pleasure to be associated with the 105<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary celebrations of the late Dr. Zakir Husain. The holding of this conference on Urdu education is an apt and imaginative way of paying tribute to this great educationist and humanist, to a man who added unusual luster to public life and who epitomized Indian civilization and culture at its glorious best.

I am also privileged to be with such a galaxy of distinguished scholars and intellectuals from different parts of the world who have, through their scholastic pursuits of Urdu language and literature, closely observed the growth and development of Indian nationalism. You are here to participate in what may be described as the most unique gathering on Urdu in Delhi since Independence. Through this conference, the organizers have appropriately highlighted the need for Urdu education to be made an important component of the National Policy on Education. This will prove to be a milestone in the arduous journey to attain nation-building itself.

Over the past century and more, Urdu and the Indian National Congress have been synonymous. Urdu has contributed to the shaping of the linguistic and cultural life with other major Indian languages much in the same way as Congress has helped in building the national character of

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\*This address was given by Congress President Mrs. Sonia Gandhi on the occasion of the International Conference on Minorities, Education and Language in Twenty-First Century Indian Democracy—the Case of Urdu with Special Reference to Dr. Zakir Husain, Late President of India, on Monday, 11 February, 2002, at Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi.

India. Progressing very rapidly from its birth and becoming the lingua franca of most of India in the seventeenth century, Urdu also became the repository of a very large and valuable treasure of literature. By pursuing similar goals and traversing the path that Urdu had taken earlier, in the post-independence era, Hindi expanded its base in various states and regions of the nation.

As a literary language Urdu had seeped into and strengthened social structures and impacted various local and regional languages in a decisive manner that shaped the composite cultural character of Indian polity. When Hindi, with a linguistic structure similar to Urdu, endeavored to extend its roots to the south, the existing literary traditions of Urdu helped in a significant way.

Historically, Urdu and Hindi are sisters, allies in cultural and political renaissance, and not adversaries. The rich works of Ameer Khusrou and, in our times, of the great Premchand himself, are a permanent proof of this. It was the rich amalgamated form of Urdu-Hindi—what we call Hindustani—which the Indian National Congress recognized from the very beginning of our freedom struggle as our national language.

It was the Hindustani slogan of *Inqilab Zindabad* that reverberated in our national consciousness and united us all in our struggle for national independence. It was Gandhiji who proposed Hindustani as the national language of India. Today, Hindustani lives on in the homes and streets of India despite not having official recognition.

After Independence, the Indian National Congress included Urdu, along with other major Indian languages, in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Urdu is the mother tongue of millions of Indians living in almost all parts of the country. Its warmth, beauty and elegance continue to attract many people who are not natural-born speakers of Urdu. It is important that friends or foes of Urdu do not confine it to one community or religion. Urdu is the language of brotherhood and camaraderie. It is the language of amity and harmony.

It is not the language of any one region or any one community. It is part of India's composite heritage. It is sad that certain forces, playing politics of language, tried to label Urdu as a foreign language while it is a well-known historical fact that Urdu was born and developed in the same region of Delhi where we are meeting today. Having failed in their designs to slot Urdu as a foreign language, they tried to undermine the independent existence of Urdu by declaring it to be a stylistic variant of Hindi. The intention behind such a move was also to deny Urdu the status of a second official language in Hindi-speaking states of the north,

particularly Uttar Pradesh where the speakers of Urdu are most numerous. Unfortunately, the very forces that are inimical to Urdu are also sowing the seeds of hatred among various communities. They have extended their stranglehold over political power and are promoting social and religious stereotypes unbecoming of our nation. The cause of Urdu is common with the concepts of humanism and peaceful coexistence that are at the heart of all religions. The future of Urdu and of our secular, liberal traditions are intrinsically linked.

The most significant and practical necessity is the need for promoting Urdu as a school subject of study. This would be possible only when, in the Three-Language Formula evolved and accepted under the National Education Policy, Urdu, as the mother tongue of millions, is assigned the same status as its sister Indian languages. For this, continuous efforts need to be made at the level of curriculum development and curriculum introduction so that the teaching and learning of Urdu are made interesting and meaningful.

At the level of curriculum, there is considerable concern about the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and its dangerous attempts to rewrite history. Rajivji [Rajiv Gandhi] had purposely given the Ministry of Education the nomenclature of the Ministry of Human Resource Development. Now this very ministry is being converted into a workshop for fabricating and putting into practice an agenda that will undermine the secular and composite cultural character of India.

Urdu is uppermost in the list of features to be vanquished. Among the other similar targets are the *madrasas* for imparting religious education. Under the pretext of modernizing them, and of internal security concern, there will be an attempt to subvert their noble traditions and heritage.

Of course many farsighted persons involved in *madrasa* education recognize that religious *madrasas* need to be modernized and given a solid scientific and technological foundation. Rajivji had initiated a scheme for this. While the *madrasas* are recognizing the necessity to move with the times, the self-styled cultural police refuse to recognize the fact that the relegation of the teaching and learning of Urdu only to the *madrasas* is actually due to the fact that it is not being made available as an integral part of school curricula.

To promote the teaching/learning of Urdu at the primary and secondary levels of education is the responsibility of the state and Urdu speakers in every state must demand this. After the Ninety-Third Amendment

to the Constitution of India, the right of Urdu speakers to obtain education in the medium of their mother tongue has to be recognized as a fundamental right. The situation must be addressed with a sense of urgency. While the minorities have a valuable right to set up religious institutions for religious education, it would be unfair to equate Urdu with Islam alone.

I hope that your deliberations have been useful and fruitful. As I said, Delhi is the birthplace of this beautiful language, a language that has verily defined India—*kārvān bastē ga'ē, Hindōstān bantā gayā*. Your stay in the city I hope has convinced you that the cradle of the Urdu language shares its beauty and large-heartedness. □