

## **Distinguished guests, friends, ladies and gentlemen,**

I would like to welcome honored guests and friends to this occasion and thank my hosts for giving me an opportunity to address you today on the subject of “Empowerment of Indian Minorities through Business Entrepreneurship”. I congratulate the Federation of Aligarh Alumni for its continued success in honoring the legacy of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and remembering our commitment to the principles upon which Aligarh Muslim University was founded – service to humanity.

At the turn of the century the richest nations in the world gathered to discuss an agenda for alleviating poverty in developing countries. They published a list of Millennium Development Goals, the most ambitious of which was to reduce by half the number of people in the world living in poverty by 2015. At the halfway point, however, it is clear that none of these goals will be achieved in time. In a few years we’ll probably be cutting and pasting the same list of goals into bold pronouncements for the 2020 or the 2050 plan, but with little to show for our efforts.

There are countries that have made substantial gains in economic growth, harnessing the opportunities presented by globalization—both in the form of economic and political reform. In this respect India deserves credit for attracting foreign investment and fostering a business climate that has created a vibrant new generation of business leaders, activist, and reformers. India is becoming a major power.

I am going to speak about poverty in India.

By some measures, poverty in India has declined in the last decade. Youth literacy rates and childhood school enrollment has improved while infant mortality is down and life expectancy has increased. Yet those of us who have been to India know that countrywide statistics do little justice in conveying the enormity of the problem of poverty that still plagues India, and in particular, Muslim India, in which vast numbers of people have completely missed the globalization train. What we have in India is an island of prosperity in an ocean of poverty.

Poverty of this magnitude has far reaching implications for state and for citizen. The abject poverty in which so many millions of Indians live is a drain on the economy. Poor people struggle to survive on the barest of essentials and are scarcely in a position to contribute to national growth and development. Poverty drains institutions of governance, depletes resources, weakens leaders and crushes hope.

Poverty fuels a dangerous mix of desperation and instability that has been ignited numerous times in outbursts of communal violence. This was never more apparent to us than during the riots in Gujarat.

There will be no single magic solution to eliminating poverty nor can we expect a single entity, be it the government or the World Bank or other aid-giving organizations to shoulder the entire burden.

It is a multifaceted problem that cannot be reduced to mere statistical measurements. And poverty will not easily disappear by increasing the number of jobs or classrooms accessible to poor people. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen’s pioneering work in this field has shown that our analysis of poverty should focus on an individual’s potential to function rather than the results the individual obtains from functioning. Individuals working to uplift themselves is critical element of the process, but without building a complete infrastructure of social support mechanisms and providing social freedom and mobility

THE SACHAR REPORT FINDINGS on EDUCATION

The Rajindar Sachar report, published in November of last year proved what we already knew anecdotally that “while there is considerable variation in the conditions of Muslims across states, the [Muslim] Community exhibits deficits and deprivation in practically all dimensions of development.”

India’s 140 million Muslims are falling behind in many key categories, including education, access to credit, and incidence of crime. In some states, education and poverty indicators show that Muslims have fallen behind even low-caste Hindus, a controversial finding that many have had difficulty in accepting. The disparities are most striking when it comes to education. Consider these findings:

Among Muslims, the literacy rate is about 59 per cent, compared with more than 65 per cent among Indians as a whole;

On average, a Muslim child attends school for three years and four months, compared with a national average of four years;

Less than four per cent of Muslims graduate from school, compared with six per cent of the total population;

Less than two per cent of the students at the elite Indian Institutes of Technology are Muslim;

About 55 percent of Muslims in villages and 60 per cent in urban areas have never been to school. The national average is 41 per cent in rural areas and 20 per cent in urban areas. In rural areas, less than 1 per cent of Muslims graduate, while in urban areas only about three per cent graduate.

The Sachar report has deepened our understanding of how entrenched poverty in the Indian Muslim community has become. Basic access to sanitation, education, adequate nutrition and health care are just the base of a pyramid that prohibits our community from advancing. The majority of workers in the Muslim community are unskilled wage earners and Muslims are disproportionately underrepresented in regular salaried or civil service positions.

Higher up the value chain the situation remains bleak. The Sachar report states that “the flow of credit to Muslims is quite limited [and the ] non-availability of credit can [has] far-reaching implications for the socio-economic and educational status of the Community.” Lack of access to education, higher wages, creates a vicious cycle that crushes a man’s hope for improvement.

Now I am going to speak to you on social entrepreneurship:

A politician would stand before you and preach pious platitudes about the progress made in combating poverty in India and the potential for future success. An economist would delve deeply into a discussion of the market forces which drive poverty. I am neither. I stand before you as a businessman and an entrepreneur and so I can only speak about the problem as I see it and practical ways that I think we can resolve it.

As an entrepreneur, I look at India and see the potential for free enterprise and creativity to unlock some of the intractable problems the Muslim community faces today. This entrepreneurial spirit must not be fueled by greed or the relentless pursuit of profit maximization. On the contrary I believe there is an approach to business and entrepreneurship that can uplift all Indians and improve the condition of those mired in abject poverty without conceding competitiveness and sacrificing the bottom line.

The enormous success of Nobel Laureate Mohammed Yunus’ microcredit finance project that began in Bangladesh in 1974 spawned an entire discipline and new methodology for combating the root causes of poverty around the world. His experiment is living proof that corporations and businesses can find ways to act responsibly without sacrificing profits and that markets can reward good stewardship with increased revenues. In India the entrepreneurship that will benefit society is that which considers how business is done, and not just how much business is done.

If private enterprise is to thrive then it must be adept at responding to change. Dynamism – that ability to face up risk and uncertainty with ingenuity and creativity – is precisely what drives developing economies to the forefront, the opposite of which is laziness and complacency. Organizations – be they public or private – must constantly reinvent themselves or else they become obsolete and useless to those who consume their products and services.

Ideas must be, as they say, incubated – nurtured with the creative energy of not just one or two people but often entire teams of strategists and planners. Herein lies a great strategic opportunity for minority communities in India – a long-term vision that combines human resource development with technological literacy to provide a solid foundation for promoting free enterprise and entrepreneurial activity.

We must also recognize where the good opportunities lie and focus our energy on those opportunities. While building my business in the United States for the last 15 years I have learned that entrepreneurs in the West function at the fringes – looking for breakthrough technologies and innovations that will change the way people do business.

In places like India the entrepreneurial space is much closer to the center. The greatest opportunities often lie in providing the most basic services that the government has failed to or is incapable of delivering. Identifying and exploiting these openings – in energy production and distribution, education, transportation, communication – will be essential for the long-term success and development of the Muslim community.

For any of this to happen we must train a generation of Muslims with the skills to excel as leaders in business, in the civil service, and in the creation of culture and arts which create pride and honor in the contributions that we as Muslims living in a pluralistic society are able to make.

I was born into a middle-class Indian family much like the ones that many of you are from. My parents instilled in me a love of education and a commitment to charity. My years at Aligarh were among the most fulfilling of my life where my professors introduced me to the world of literature and art and mathematics. I left Aligarh with a love of knowledge – but more importantly – my years at the University oriented my heart towards good ethics and the principle of service and the hope that I would be able to improve the lives of people around me.

I can say to you that without a doubt my success as an entrepreneur in the United States is no small way indebted to the AMU values that I have carried with me for many, many years. I built my company with an aim for making profit but never did I lose sight of the underlying commitment to excellence and to good ethics in my dealings with employees and clients.

## **WHAT CAN WE DO**

First let me speak to you about poverty:

Our most potent weapon against poverty will be our pocketbooks. But, let's be honest – the nations of the world and international organizations have given billions of dollars in aid to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In spite of the unprecedented levels of aid more and more people end up more poor year after year. So money alone is not the solution.

Muslims are undoubtedly among the most generous people in the world. Our obligation to pay the zakat means that an equal portion of all of our wealth is to be allocated for charity each year - and there is no doubt that many of us far exceed the percentage delineated by the shari'a.

Charity remains an obligation upon us as a means of spiritual purification. Yet it has been shown that poor people trying to break out of poverty would much rather be given an opportunity to improve their condition by their own work than simply receive another handout. Our investment in the Indian Muslim community must therefore embrace a vision for what they can contribute to India and to the international community years into the future.

Where racism and hatred are prevalent we must promote interfaith dialogue and bring people from different communities together to work on social projects. The government and the private sector can play a positive role in building greater trust and cooperation in the pursuit of peace and national unity.

Let me speak to you about education:

The greatest gift we can give is that of education which empowers the mind and uplifts the soul. Education enhances the dignity of a human being, and increases his or her self respect. In his speech on January 8, 1877 in honor of the foundation of the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College, Aligarh, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan acknowledged “nothing could remove the obstacles to progress [for Indian Muslims] than education.” The World Bank – many decades later echoes the same sentiment – that “[e]ducation is central to development. It empowers people and strengthens nations. It is a powerful “equalizer,” opening doors to all to lift themselves out of poverty.” By promoting education we mean to create complete human beings, and not skew the balance between the Intellect, which seeks to understand God and implement the message of the Prophets, and that Rational mind which when nurtured and developed can make us leaders in society.

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan had emphasized “Acquisition of knowledge of science and technology is the only solution for the problems of the Muslims.” By building schools, hostels, and offering scholarships we can give the Muslim youth of India a chance to gain the advanced scientific and technological skills to compete with their countrymen who have reaped the benefits of international investment in India’s high-tech sector and its vast outsourcing industry. Muslims require more sophisticated training in business and management sciences to transcend the level of the low-wage worker at the bottom of the economic totem pole.

We know that books have given way to bits of information carried along the information superhighway and that the Internet can be a tremendous enabling force in the educational experience of mankind. So in addition to scholarships, we can create institutions which provide the learning infrastructure to provide Indian Muslims with more access to the knowledge and information that will ultimately lift them from the depths of poverty.

I am going to speak about entrepreneurship:

A concerted effort is needed to provide employment opportunities for young people through private enterprises, especially by ensuring that training and skills development are linked to market demands. What we need is an alliance of entrepreneurs, investors, financial institutions, corporations, and media working together to influence public policy and to catalyze innovative programs.

We should help disadvantage young people to become entrepreneurs and provide business mentoring and seed funding for innovative ideas. As each new enterprise takes root another young leader learns how to build a business, develop a credit history and ultimately become an employer himself or herself.

We should engage in assisting India Muslim youth by investing in socio-economic development by increasing economic opportunities and inclusions, providing access to credit, insurance and health care and enhancing communications and technology infrastructure. We need to be innovative and we need to engender innovation.

We should not be so shortsighted to view the arena of our potential influence only in the rural villages and shantytowns of Muslim India. Right here in the United States, where we have migrated to and where our children’s children will be born, we must do more to plant our roots and to establish our presence in the culture and society.

This means being engaged politically – not just superficially but rather to embrace the political process from grassroots organizing and mobilizing to local and state government.

There are literally 100s if not 1000s of non-governmental organizations working at all levels to promote education, human rights, culture, religious freedom [etc] in India. These organizations are funded by the generous grants of foundations, which, like us, recognize the need to build a world that is more equal and just for all. We must be aware of and involved with these efforts for the sake of our brothers and sisters in India.

Moreover by engaging with these groups and with similar groups in India with our ideas and our financial support we can position ourselves to exert influence in changing some of the underlying policies that will create a more level playing field envisioned by the recommendations issuing from the Sachar report.

The Prime Minister of India's support for the Sachar report – with all of the controversy that the study created– is a positive sign that there are opportunities to work with the government to meet the needs of all citizens of India. The fact that Muslims from around the world have read and commented on the report is another step forward. Our world is driven by data and by facts - and armed with the facts about the state of Muslim India our ability to exert influence on the situation is vastly improved over a condition of ignorance and disinformation.

We must press for the reforms recommended in the report to be implemented by communicating through all possible channels and urging the Prime Minister and the Parliament to take resolute action. India, as a multicultural and multiethnic society, must work hard to ensure that the delicate balance between groups is managed so as to avert the communal violence that has erupted so frequently in India's history.

### **My dear friends and colleagues.**

A sense of humility brings us together as brothers and as countrymen linked by a common goal to do what we can to benefit humanity. We are concerned about the plight of our Muslim brothers and sisters in India but we must show empathy and resolve for all those around the world afflicted with poverty and deserving of an opportunity to experience their God given rights to live peacefully and in prosperity. Indian Muslims must be made active players, rather than passive victims. Our mission should be to help Indian Muslims break out of the vicious cycle of poverty. Poverty does not belong in a civilized human society. It's proper place is in the museum. That is where it should be. There is a message to all of us at the top of the Aligarh Muslim University's website. It captures the essence of education. It reads "Enter to dream. Depart to serve." I implore you to depart to serve.

I began this speech with Sir Syed's words at Aligarh's inauguration. I would like to end remembering his final remarks:

"I and my friends and the entire community gave their blood to build up an institution at a place which was in wilderness, a desert where not even a grass grew, we built-up classrooms, hostels, libraries, laboratories, playgrounds.

"You have reached a particular stage and remember one thing that when I undertook the task, there was criticism all around against me, abuses were hurled upon me, life had become so difficult for me that I aged before my age, I lost my hair, my eyesight, but not my vision. My vision never dimmed, my determination never failed, I built this institution for you and I am sure, you will carry the light of this institution far and wide, darkness will disappear from all around. "

Let us do our part to ensure the dreams of young Indian Muslims shall never die. Let us fulfill Sir Syed's vision and his mission. Let us keep his memory alive.

God bless you.