

*Round Table of Heads of State and Government on Dialogue among Civilizations*

*Statement of Hon'ble Mr. Jaswant Singh, Minister of External Affairs*

*on September 5, 2000*

---

His Excellency President Khattami,

Mr. Director General,

Excellencies,

The distinguished Heads of State and others that have earlier participated have, already, most eloquently elucidated several facets of civilizations, their contributions and also exchanges between them. Indian thought, an unique synthesis, an unmatched confluence of thought has always held that deliverance of man is possible but only through release from "avidya", or ignorance. I am confident that discussions today, also later during the Year of the Dialogue among Civilizations, will fulfil this yearning for greater knowledge and bring enhanced appreciation of each other, our ways of life, also in consequence enhance the contribution that each of us can make to the other, to a common, shared richness, and the eternal journey of Man. That is a road which has no end.

I visualise the dialogue among civilizations as a confluence of great streams, some ancient, and thus widespread and placid, imbued with aeons of reflection and knowledge, the very distillation of human experience: others younger and ebullient, forging ahead with the vitality of invention and material progress. These streams must merge, greening the entire spread of humanity with shared wisdom, with freedom of spirit, with liberty, thus generating lives enriched by real choice, drawing in the rivulets of modern technology, to nourish the arid soil of poverty and human deprivation, to create a world secure in respect for each other, where there is no inequality, no discrimination and no insecurity from want or from violence.

It is only appropriate that there be a Dialogue of Civilizations now, that Iran initiate this dialogue, that UNESCO contribute to it. This century that is past marked the culmination as also the end of the Age of Imperialism. An age in which Europe spread out, building on its technological innovations but also on colonialism and imperialism, a development to which the Heads of State of Algeria and Nigeria have already given voice. The century was also marked by a deathening silence of the lack of dialogue.

Today in our midst, in consequence to the growing influences of the media, the poor certainly are well aware of the life-styles of the fortunate and the affluent, but can the 'haves' say, with any degree of conviction, that they have more than a fleeting sense of the existence, in their midst, when we say we are a global village of equalness, of shanties, of slums and of the oppressed, on whose shoulders and through whose labour some of the present day material prosperity is based. This Dialogue, which hopefully will bring together the advances of all civilizations, will be judged by but one touchstone: on that of compassion, of a reaffirmation of human conscience and of universal fellowship, the care that it will bring to

those whom material advances have left behind. I do trust that this Dialogue among Civilizations would promote a sense of the indivisibility of mutual belonging and thus nurture the feeling that a community's or a civilization's ascent cannot be complete until it is accompanied by the progress and advancement of the entire human family.

Unprecedented advances in science and technology hold out the promise of great material progress and development. We stand on the doorstep of the Age of Knowledge based industrial revolution. It offers an unique possibility of intensifying productive exchanges in diverse fields. Science and technology also provides us valuable tools for historic preservation, documentation and wide dissemination of the cultural heritage of all civilizations. The promotion of identity and cultural diversity, could, in itself, become the very substance of dialogue among civilizations.

Globalisation should contribute towards the creation of a world that offers equal opportunity not any obliteration. This tendency of threatening diversity and unique cultural attainments through globalisation and the technological revolution we must guard against. A balance between the acceptance of integrative globalisation, to mutual advantage, and that necessary quest for identity has emerged as a major civilizational challenge of our times. Unless vigorously addressed to, by those that are threatened by the erasing hand of uniformity, it will heighten the anguish of exclusion and of marginalisation, and at a profoundly deeper level it will separate humanity instead of bringing it together. Cultures are not to be placed on the extinction list, as in the world of bio-diversity.

Of course, maintenance and promotion of identities and protection of cultural and civilisational traditions must also not become a tool to shield ultra-nationalism and exclusionism. Mahatma Gandhi said that he would certainly not like to be blown off his feet, but would also not like to shut the windows of his consciousness to the rest of the world; breezes from all directions must blow through my house. Therefore, exceptionalism and exclusivism is the basis for a 'Clash of Civilizations', instead of a 'Dialogue of Civilizations' which would enrich us all collectively.

Mr. President,

Promotion of universalism must also not become a means to undermine the rich diversity of the human race, thought and civilisational accomplishments. There should be no attempts at a standardisation of global cultures and civilizations. The parameters of this Dialogue should move away from the traditional, to a greater appreciation of diversity, as but a variation on the theme of humanity, and its unlimited potential, this enlarging of our common denominator of values and principles on which after all, entire humanity rests. The Indian sage Vivekanand once said that you cannot claim to be more human on the basis that you have six fingers and not five.

The Indic civilisation, which I have the honour to belong, from time immemorial has believed in the fundamental unity of all humanity. The entire world is a family, "*vasudhaiva kutumbkam*". Amongst many one of the messages of our philosophy has been:

*"ekam sat, viprah bahuda vadanti"*: There is but One Truth, the learned express that One Truth in different ways.

Respect for all cultures, non-violence and tolerance therefore form the core of the Indian value system. Indian tradition has fostered the value of creative interaction and peaceful coexistence for thousands of years among our peoples as amongst people of the world. It is this vibrant mosaic that is questioned by the belief that civilization can be based only on narrow religious affinities. Religion is personal and an individual's relation with his or her God; civilization is what is common, what is shared and that which enriches all. While promoting the Dialogue among Civilizations we must be conscious of this delicate difference.

Over the past half century, the UN has served as a host to all nations, promoting reconciliation and a culture of dialogue among them. Search for common moral and ethical values has led to the codification of a range of international instruments concerning tolerance, human rights, cultural cooperation and cooperation in science and technology. Values of democracy, human rights, pluralism and respect for rule of law, all civilisational influences, have acquired almost universal validity. Dialogue among and within nations and civilizations can and must promote understanding, pluralism and diversity as essential components of progress and human advancement. The central question that we have to grapple with is how to forge societies that are truly liberal and multicultural, but which retain a sense of unity and a corpus of common values: how they can best contribute to the emergence of a truly shared and liberal "human civilization": how the Dialogue among Civilizations can deal effectively with the menaces that today afflict and threaten to drown our civilizational heritage.

I believe that the United Nations and UNESCO, in the context of Dialogue among Civilizations, should work to ensure that the principles of pluralism and democracy, acceptance of diversity and mutual respect, freedom and equality, solidarity and a sense of shared responsibility - in a word humanity - are consolidated. The Dialogue must bring out the uniting features of our civilizations, all of which have contributed to the human saga, while preserving those distinctive features of a civilization which gives it a distinctive genius and adds to the totality of human richness. India will contribute, in thought and in action, in this endeavour.