

## **Challenge and Opportunity of the New Age**

*by Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India*

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Since we have many friends from outside the country, I would like to say just a few words in English. It was a very good idea of Sant Kipal Singh to call this conference of all religions. As I said in Hindi just now, one of the books that had a profound influence on me when I was quite small was called "The Essential Unity of All Religions". I saw from it how in fundamental thought, in the encouragement of an atmosphere of love, of harmony, of cooperation, of helping others, all religions had a deep message to give. We in India have for many years tried to practise these ideas; but being human beings, we are full of failings and we do not always live up to our ideals. We were also taught that, just as the rain falls in many parts of the earth and ultimately most of it find its way to the ocean, in the same way, whatever path we find of worship, if we do it in the right way, if we do it with sincerity, ultimately it leads to truth and to a greater understanding of the world and of ourselves, and gives us the inner strength with which to meet the challenges of life.

There has always been materialism and evil in the world, but along with that, there have also always been forces which have tried to combat them, which have tried to forge a path of peace and harmony. Today perhaps we need this more than ever before, not because man is worse, but because he has more power to do bad things. And we see, that this power, which could have gone such a long way in relieving the suffering of the many people who have been deprived, underprivileged and oppressed through the ages, is used for warlike efforts, for threats, and for creating disharmony rather than co-operation.

So conferences like this with different trends of thoughts and philosophies coming together may find a way which can inspire people today to give of their greater knowledge, their greater capacity, their greater power to forge a new path for mankind. Many people have written that 1973 was the end of an age. We do not know what the new age will be like, but it will be different. In what way it will be different lies in the hand of all of us, especially the young people, because it is they who will make this new age. It depends on them whether they want to follow the path of peace and develop the capacity to create harmony, to create better understanding out of the ancient truths. A remarkable thing about these truths is that, although they are ancient, you will find that they apply to modern life - in the context of what is happening today, they are relevant; they give the answers we need. But unfortunately the world doesn't seem to have time to think, to study these things, to find out their deeper meaning; time to let them act and to take real strength from them.

Whatever this new age will be, it will be an age of man - of the common man - and therefore, whatever thoughts, whatever worship, whatever direction can strengthen man - and by strength I do not mean the strength of weapons, the strength of power or

organisations, but the real strength which lies within each one of us - whatever will strengthen that part of us that will enable us to use this power wisely and make the world a better world, and make us better human beings.

So the challenge which faces humanity today is greater perhaps than any challenge it has faced before. But along with the challenge is the opportunity. Never have we had such an opportunity for moulding a new way of life, because with better communications, as we said just now, distance is not a barrier. The seas, which we thought divided one continent from another, are like bridges which join the continents together. The mass media also give the opportunity of bringing different thoughts to different parts, of creating a better understanding between peoples, and only out of understanding can grow friendship. Out of friendship can grow co-operation, and out of co-operation can come peace for the individual, for the group, for the nation, and we hope for the world as a whole, so that we can go towards what many people have dreamed - the concept of one world.

In our philosophy it has often been said in many different words that all of the human family is one, but before it was just a very distant ideal; people regarded the human family perhaps as only those people, who lived around them, because they couldn't see any far enough, they were not in touch with others. But today we have the opportunity of being in touch with people no matter how far away they live - not only through words, but through bridges of understanding, of thoughts, of concepts - and we should use this opportunity for strengthening the forces of peace and understanding.

We are talking here of harmony, of peace, of the one-ness of man; but I am very sad that in my own country there is a great deal of disharmony. There are forces of violence - forces which want to exploit the difficulties between people. Sometimes we quarrel over religion, sometimes over caste, or language, or we quarrel over some small dispute between one state or another; and the net result is not the spirit of peace and harmony, but the spirit of disharmony and the spirit of discontent. We are facing very great difficulties, but the question is, how do we combat them? How do we get the strength to meet them and to find a way out? It cannot be through disharmony.

We are naturally sad when people die through these violence, whether it is because of those who themselves do violence or those who try to prevent them; and our full sympathy is with the families of the bereaved, with those who have suffered in other ways. But when we look back after some time we find that this kind of eruptions do not achieve what we want. They achieve only disharmony and encourage what is not good in man (because each of us has the good and the bad). It is up to us which part we encourage, we allow to come out. And this I think is the message this Conference can give to India, which needs it just as much as the rest of the world.

So all of you here - some have travelled long distances, but the distance we have to travel in the spirit is much longer than any distance which you can cover by ship or by plane or by train - and if we can go in the right direction, lift up our spirits for right action, then I think all of us together can contribute to the making of a better world. I think that this Conference has served a very valuable part; all these steps are not big steps, they are small steps; but any journey, however long, is completed by the steps one

takes toward the goal. So I think that Sant Kirpal Singh and all those who have co-operated with Him in this great venture are to be congratulated and we seek their blessings in our work; and to all of you who have come I give my good wishes. Thank you.