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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

OF

LADY ABDUL QADIR (OF LAHORE),

AT

**THE SEVENTH ALL-INDIA
WOMEN'S CONFERENCE,**

HELD AT

CALCUTTA,

IN

DECEMBER 1933.

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SISTER DELEGATES, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

It is not in merely conventional terms that I wish to offer my sincerest thanks to you for the high honour you have conferred upon me by electing me as the President of the Calcutta session of the All-India Women's Conference. It is indeed a privilege to be called upon to occupy the chair which has been occupied before me by illustrious ladies like H. H. the Maharani of Baroda, and the late lamented Begum mother of Bhopal, and by other leaders distinguished in the literary and intellectual world, among whom the name of my esteemed friend Mrs. Sarojini Naidu deserves special mention. I have accepted your generous offer with great diffidence, being conscious of my own short-comings. I do not possess any academic distinction or literary attainments and all that I have done to deserve the exalted position in which you have placed me, is that I have, in my own humble way, been one of the many workers in the movement for the educational and social advancement of women. I stand before you, therefore, as a mere worker, in response to what I regard a call of duty.

Another point to which I wish to refer, before discussing the main questions with which we are concerned in this Conference, is the language of my address. My acquaintance with the English language is not extensive and the only Indian language with which I am familiar is Urdu. I would have been happier if I could have addressed you in Urdu, but my friend Rani Rajwadi, the able and devoted

Organising Secretary of this Conference, advised me to read the address in English, as it would be more easily understood in Calcutta. I wish I knew the sweet language of your Province and of your great poet, Rabindra Nath Tagore, and could address the ladies of Bengal in their mother tongue, but as unfortunately I do not know it, I have to read to you an English translation of my address in Urdu.

Need of a Common Language.

I may be permitted to say a word here about the need of a common language, if we want to make real progress toward the goal before us. I think the Hindustani language has a greater claim on our attention in our meetings, than English, and it is a pity that stress has not been laid in our Conference on the necessity of using it more freely as the medium of discussion and exchange of ideas. I think this question, which I am touching incidentally, raises a problem of the highest importance for the good of our country. Our leaders have long felt the need of adopting a common Indian language for the whole of India, which every Province may learn, in addition to its own. It is generally recognised that the unity of language is one of the most essential features of a common nationality. It has also been indicated, on more occasions than one, that Hindustani alone has a chance of being utilised for this purpose with success. I remember that about this time in 1917, there was a great gathering of Indian leaders in this very town, when the Congress, the Muslim League and the Muslim Educational Conference were all holding their sittings here. At the end of their sittings a

combined meeting of the representatives of these public bodies was held, at which Mahatma Gandhi advocated the need of a common Indian tongue and was supported by other leaders, including Mrs. Sarojini Naidu. Sixteen years have elapsed since resolutions to this effect were passed, but unfortunately our thoughts have been so absorbed by other things that we have not advanced one step towards the goal of a common language. We must, therefore, as sincere well-wishers of our mother-land try to achieve this object.

Education.

I pass on now to a consideration of the questions which are our main concern, that is education and social reform.

So much has been said on these subjects from time to time that they have become very trite, but if you ponder seriously over them, they present fresh problems every day, which are bristling with difficulties, the solution of which requires the services of the best brains among us.

One of the most important questions is what should be the type of education for women. I think there can be no two opinions now as to the unsuitability of the existing scheme of studies to the needs of girl students. It was meant really for boys and is now becoming out of date even for them. It is more so for girls. It may be all right for some girls, who want to seek employment as teachers in schools, but for the majority of them

a line adapted to their particular needs must be chalked out, so that they may be able to complete their studies in a shorter period and may acquire knowledge, which may be of use to them in their domestic life and in the bringing up of their children. In addition to this they should possess some general knowledge, which may enable them to be wide-awake and useful citizens of their motherland.

The Lady Irwin College.

Among the educational achievements of our Conference is the starting of the Lady Irwin College at Delhi, where girls from various parts of India receive training as teachers. Its scheme of studies is different to that of the ordinary Arts Colleges and the institution is intended to serve as a model for similar institutions elsewhere. I understand that the number of pupils under training in the Lady Irwin College, which began with twelve girls, has already risen to about forty, which is quite a good start. In fact, I am told that demand for admission to the college is growing and several applications have been refused for want of accommodation in the present building, which is a rented house and has not got room for more. There is also the difficulty of want of sufficient funds. I think it would be a great help to the College, if we could secure some Government building in Old Delhi for its use. I hear two Govern-

ment buildings have been recently vacated, that is, the house which was occupied by H. E. the Commander-in-Chief and the Metcalfe House. I think the Conference should request the Government to give one of the two buildings to the Lady Irwin College. I would suggest that before formally applying to the Government, we should send a representative deputation, on behalf of our Conference, to Her Excellency Lady Willingdon. Her keen interest in the welfare of women is well-known and we can confidently look forward to the success of our proposal, if we succeed in securing her powerful support in its favour.

Vocational Education.

Having referred to the institution which has been established to help the type of higher education suited to the needs of women, I wish to say a word about another type of institutions needed for the majority of girls, whose circumstances require that they should aim at nothing more than elementary education, coupled with a training in some useful handicrafts. I believe the time has come for an organised effort for the spread of such education and we require a large number of schools, teaching not only reading and writing, but also imparting vocational training of a practical kind, on economic lines.

Hitherto training in handicrafts was given to girls with the idea of adding to their accomplishments, but

the increasing struggle of life clearly shows that the time is not far distant, when a growing number of women will be called upon to be their own bread-winners, and when marriage will no longer be considered as the only career for girls. We should equip them for the coming period, when many of them will have to live a life more or less independent of men.

Financial Help.

Ladies and gentlemen, these schemes require money before they can be translated into realities, and the question is, where is it to come from. One source which must be tapped and which has not been sufficiently tapped in any part of India, is the securing of our proper share of the money set apart for education by the Central and the Provincial Governments. While gratefully acknowledging what Government has done to help female education in all parts of the country, I have no hesitation in saying that the help has been far from commensurate with the requirements of the situation.

As you all know our education started long after that of our brothers and we have to make up the deficiency, but instead of any funds being made available to us, over and above those given for the education of men, we are given a small proportion of what they get. This is very unsatisfactory and it should be our urgent and pressing demand that the amount spent from the

public treasury on female education should be equal to that spent on the education of boys. Of course we should also show our earnestness by raising additional funds by private subscriptions and by appealing to the munificence of our ruling Princes and their wives, as well as to the generosity of the landed gentry and of the great magnates of the commercial world. I am sure that if our efforts, to secure the necessary money for carrying on the work before us, are persistent and sustained, success is certain, not only in the domain of education, but also in social reform, as the two are more closely related to one another than is often realised.

Social Reform.

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So far the great difficulty in the way of social reform has been the appalling ignorance that prevails among the masses in our country, and nothing but wide-spread education can dispel it. A campaign for the enlightenment of the masses is needed and it requires an army of workers. Though a great deal of work has been done in the past and is being accomplished now by honorary workers, to whom we are extremely grateful, a devoted band of paid and duly trained workers will be needed, if a vast campaign aiming at speedy results in all parts of the country is undertaken.

One of the means of spreading knowledge, which has already been tried with success, is the education of adults, but it will have to be carried on much more extensively as well as intensively in order to prove effective.

Press Propaganda.

Another direction in which work is needed is propaganda by means of the press. At present the press in India is practically in the hands of men. In drawing attention to this, I do not wish to be ungrateful to our brothers who control the press. I acknowledge with thanks that their attitude towards our aspirations has been full of sympathy and they have tried to help us in the great task we have set before us. What I wish to emphasise is the need of making a greater use of the agency of the press, by women, by making literary contributions in the existing newspapers and magazines, in support of our claims and by starting newspapers and journals conducted by women to promote our interests. We have some magazines edited by women in Urdu and Hindi and other vernaculars. I should like to see them strengthened and improved, so that we may have a powerful voice in shaping public opinion.

Public Opinion.

The importance of a healthy public opinion is not often adequately realised. All measures of social reform depend on

it for their success. Take for instance a reform on which our Conference has been so keen; that is, the discontinuance of child-marriage. Not long ago the Legislature passed the Sarda Act, penalising marriages between persons below a certain age. The organisations of women in India supported the introduction of this measure in the Legislative Assembly and have since its adoption felt a legitimate pride in their achievement, but it has been felt in some quarter that its practical effect so far has been comparatively small. In my opinion this is due to the fact that sufficient efforts have not been made to supplement this legislation by educating public opinion. I believe that in matters of social reform, methods of persuasion lead slowly but surely to success.

Use of the Cinema.

A valuable agency, which can be used for the purpose of propaganda, is the Cinema. I think we can utilise it with advantage. If educational films are shown to women in towns and villages, and special films are prepared for them, throwing light on subjects connected with social reform, I believe we can do much more in a short period than through a long course of teaching by means of books. I should like to see a distinct branch of activity started under the auspices of this Conference and a permanent Sub-Committee placed in charge of it. That committee should make it its business to have interesting stories or dramas written, showing the evils

of customs we like to discourage or condemn. For instance, a story may be written to illustrate the evils of child-marriage. Another story may illustrate how a family that borrowed money for extravagant marriage expenses, and felt happy in feasting people beyond its means, came to grief when the debt swelled into an enormous amount, with interest, and when the creditor came to execute his decree, and seized all the goods and chattels of the family and reduced them to poverty and ruin. I am sure such scenes, shown on the screen, would bring home, even to ignorant villagers, the dangers of the course that they are pursuing. I believe money spent on this kind of propaganda would be very usefully spent and would produce good results. Similarly if popular songs and poems are composed, condemning bad customs and commending reforms, and are translated in different vernaculars prevailing in our country, I think very good results can be achieved.

Reform of Customs.

Among the social reforms, that are urgently needed in all parts of the country, is the reform of customs relating to the celebration of marriages and to ceremonies connected with births and deaths. With very rare exceptions, the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, all follow customs which are extravagant and ruinous. Social reformers have been advocating that simplicity and economy should be

observed on these occasions, and in theory every one agrees with them, but in practice the surrounding pressure proves too much for all of us, and some of the best people among us do exactly what their less enlightened sisters and brothers do. I do not think that it will be an exaggeration to say that at least half of the great burden of indebtedness in our country, particularly in rural areas, is due to the unnecessary expenses incurred in keeping up customs, which are either relics of days of barbarism, or have outlived their uses. By keeping them up we are adding to the economic poverty and misery of our country. It must be remembered that the responsibility of us women, so far as the reform of customs is concerned, is perhaps greater than that of men. The influence of their women-folk is often pleaded by men as an excuse for the observance of customs, which they can no longer justify as reasonable, and I must say that this plea is not unfounded. If women's organisations make a real and earnest effort to get rid of extravagance on useless ceremonies, they will be doing a service of the greatest magnitude to our country.

Rights of Inheritance.

Another important reform advocated by us in this Conference is that women should be allowed to inherit property. We have tried to get a measure recognising women's rights of inheritance passed in the Assembly, but our efforts have not yet met with success. I have

no doubt, however, that there is a growing volume of opinion behind our reasonable demand and we are bound to get it, if we continue to press it. This is a matter in which the interests of Hindu and Muslim women are equally affected, though in theory Muslim women have already got, under their personal law, what their Hindu sisters are asking for, through legislation. As you all know, under the law of Islam, females are entitled, along with males, to a share of inheritance and in families that still cling to their law, they do get it, but in many parts of India a custom has sprung up depriving women of their shares. It is necessary for us, therefore, to insist that in case of Muslim women the Islamic law as to the share of females may be given effect to in practice, and a new law may be passed for the benefit of Hindu women, to enable them to get their share of the property of their husbands and parents.

Women's Franchise.

Sister delegates—I hope you will not think that I am unmindful of the value of political advancement, because I have not made any mention of the political aspirations of our sex. We are proud to have in our ranks women who have worked side by side with our men in the political struggle that has been going on in India for some

time past. We have among us women who are keen political workers and have made great sacrifices in the cause of freedom. I have, however, advisedly refrained from venturing into the domain of politics, because from the beginning this Conference has decided to eschew politics. It appears that the reason underlying this decision is sound. For popularising the cause of education or for bringing about social reform you require to enlist the sympathies of all, irrespective of caste or creed or shades of opinion. On the other hand in the arena of politics there is a great clash of interest and sharp differences of opinion. It would have been detrimental to the development of the feeling of unity and strength, on which we can now justly pride ourselves, if controversial political questions had been included in our programme. In fact, it is because we have not allowed ourselves to be divided, that we have been able to show remarkable unanimity on an important question like the Franchise of women, which is a part of politics, but which has such an important bearing on education and reform that we could not leave it unconsidered. We formulated our opinions on this question, and our representatives who gave evidence before the Indian Franchise Committee, insisted on Adult Franchise as the ideal to be aimed at, and demanded equal opportunities for both sexes. In other words our demand was that sex should not be made a ground of disability. This year our Conference, in con-

junction with the two other important organisations of women, that is, the Women's Indian Association, and the National Council of Women in India, sent delegates to give evidence before the Joint Select Committee in England, and they repeated the demands already made by us, with certain modifications. We are disappointed to find that our claims have received very inadequate recognition, and the Franchise proposed for us is even less than the recommendations of the Simon Commission and the Indian Franchise Committee. I would, however, advise the Women's organisations to remember that even in advanced countries of the West, the task of women seeking to secure their rights has been uphill, and we should not be discouraged by the tardy recognition of our claims. We should utilise the opportunities that we have got and go on asking for more, trusting in the rightness and strength of our cause.

Division of Labour.

Ladies and Gentlemen, before concluding my brief address, I ask for your indulgence for a few minutes more, to offer a practical suggestion. I think our work, not only in this Conference, but also in many other national and social organisations, suffers from want of sufficient division of labour. Too much is expected from

the few, how are giving their time and energy freely to the cause, and too little is contributed by the rank and file. The majority think that they have done enough, if they have attended a meeting and given their lip-sympathy to the cause, or at the utmost a small subscription towards it. For the remaining part of the year they go to sleep. We want zealous workers, who would volunteer to go to various places throughout the year, in a missionary spirit, to propagate ideas of social reform in all its branches, by showing instructive films or by magic lantern lectures. Each group of such workers may be placed under the leadership of experienced and tried organisers, and they may be asked to report the results of their work to the Conference every year, at its annual sessions. Thus a network of useful activities may be spread all over the country. If we succeed in carrying out a constructive programme of this kind, we shall have done more for enhancing our prestige and for winning our rights, than can be done by passing any number of resolutions and by making eloquent speeches.

Ladies and gentlemen, I do not propose to detain you much longer. I have drawn your attention in a general way to some of the measures that can be adopted for realising the objects we have in view. With an organisation like ours, there is nothing that

we cannot accomplish. We have no less than 118 branches or constituencies in different parts of India, twelve of which are in Indian States and with a little more effort we can easily multiply this number. If all our branches resolve to carry on, throughout the year, the work that we decide to do at our annual gatherings, we can conduct a campaign of reform and progress that may change for the better the future of our country. We have been very lucky, so far, in not having in our camp any distinctions based on race or religion. In the matter of unity and co-operation we have been able to set a laudable example to our brothers and sons. May God grant us strength to stand by the noble principles with which we have started, and which have splendidly helped us in creating so large and representative an organisation during the few years that we have been in existence.

I thank you, in conclusion, for the kindly reception that you have accorded me and the patience with which you have listened to me, and I close with the earnest wish that our deliberations in this great Assembly, held, in this old metropolis of India, may be crowned with success, and from these deliberations may emerge proposals which may result in the progress of our beloved mother-land and the glory of her womanhood.

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