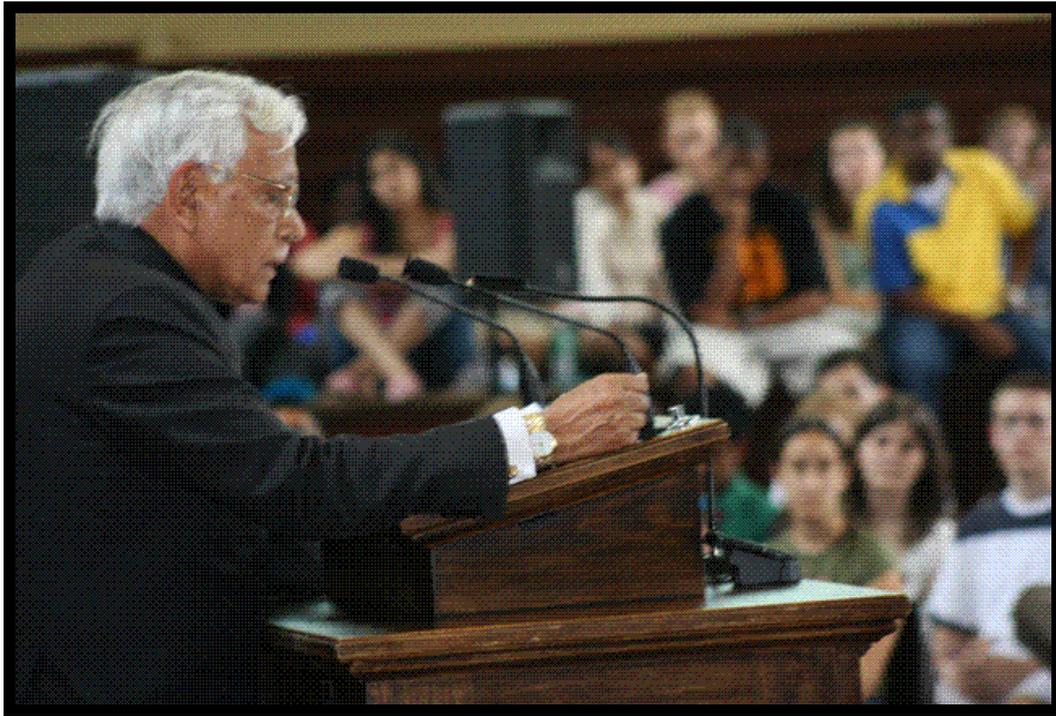




The Argument for India
Address by MR. K NATWAR SINGH, MINISTER OF EXTERNAL
AFFAIRS to the Brown University on 23rd September 2005



I am delighted to be with all of you this afternoon and consider it a privilege to be invited to deliver the inaugural India Lecture at Brown University. I am especially grateful to the Watson Institute for International Studies for taking this initiative. I know that you have a large South Asian alumni but that is not the only reason to select the theme that I have for the lecture. India has a larger message for the world, one that acquires even greater relevance as we demonstrate an ability to meet major challenges of our times. I hope my argument is, therefore, viewed as more than a national case made by a Foreign Minister.

2. Certainly, I would like to believe that three decades as a diplomat have enabled me to bring some objectivity to the subject. Two subsequent decades in political life led to a deeper understanding of the daily struggles of people who articulate through their routine an outlook to life. As I seek to balance the two and reflect on the intricacies of our social structure, I can only imagine how bewildering we - in John Kenneth Galbraith's famous phrase 'a functioning anarchy' - must be to others. It is said that when President Ulysses Grant went on a world tour and finally reached Japan, his meeting with the Meiji Emperor - which must have been a cultural experience in itself - saw them both express their perplexity about India. One can almost imagine them agreeing on the notion that everything that is said about India is true, and so too is its opposite!

3. This India, so fascinating and yet so incomprehensible to many, is today emerging from the recesses of history and assuming a prominent place in the global arena. It seeks to be understood better but its unique nature makes that very process a challenging endeavour. India's rise, for example, has not been an exercise in assertion on past traditional patterns in world history. Instead, it has been incremental to the point of being imperceptible, and natural enough to be harmonious. Demographic trends and historical traditions have come together to make India, along with the United States, China, Europe, Japan and Russia, among the key players of this century. This was obviously not preordained but a consequence of policy choices, governance quality and societal mores. The scale and complexity of our achievements merit serious evaluation. After all, it is not every country that, even while addressing primary issues like health, shelter and literacy, is simultaneously able to compete at a global level in technology, business and culture. What makes this phenomenon further worth studying is the framework in which these processes of change are unfolding. The message and the medium are both equally instructive to others facing similar problems. Our emergence has a particular implication for the United States, another large multi-cultural democracy.

4. When India became independent 58 years ago, we made decisions that, even in retrospect, can only be described as incredibly brave. Consider that we were emerging from two centuries of colonial rule and poverty, illiteracy and obscurantism were still rife. Yet, as early as 1931, Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian leadership chose to opt for a democratic form of Government with universal adult franchise as its basis. It was this bold step that actually took democracy beyond its Euro-Atlantic confines and gave it a universal character. Till then, India was considered more an embodiment of a civilisation than a definition of a conventional nation state. It took a democratic construct to bring together its very many languages, ethnicities and customs and provide it a firm binding force. Serving as a common denominator for unity to come out of this enormous diversity, democracy enabled our people to become participants in national rebuilding and underlined their interest in its success. Our leaders at the time of independence could have easily opted to be a one-party state. Many other post-colonial societies did and the Congress party certainly dominated the political scene. It is a tribute to their wisdom that they saw our future in political pluralism. Elections over the years at various levels have strengthened people's self-perception as stakeholders in the system. Democracy also facilitated the rapid dissolution of kingdoms and princely states that dotted the Indian map when the British finally left and thereby, laid the foundation for a modern state. Americans, perhaps more than other people, can identify with an exercise of constructing a society on principles of freedom, human rights and rule of law. Although two centuries apart, there are striking similarities between the debates in

our two countries during the process of constitution making. The difference was that India's circumstances were infinitely more challenging. The success of Indian democracy transcends cultural and geographical limitations earlier ascribed to the political values on which they are based.

5. The building of a democratic India has not been an easy exercise. There is no historical precedent for a billion people determining their collective destiny through a mechanism of consent. There is no blueprint or textbook that sets out a road map. We have improvised along our way, trusting to the innate wisdom of our people. It is one of the great wonders of our time that a largely illiterate society – only 14% were educated in 1947- could address their problems with such maturity and moderation. Some credit must go as well to the manner in which traditional ways, particularly village-level self-government, have been adapted to address contemporary challenges. Our approach also took into account that centralised prescriptions are not always the most effective for problem solving. Establishing democratic structures and making them durable was highly dependent on effectively utilising local and regional knowledge that is ingrained in every society. In India's case, by tapping into traditions of pluralism and networks at various levels, democracy emerged as a credible political way for post-colonial India rather than a mere imitation of colonial forms. Structures at local, regional and federal levels ensure that identities are maintained and reconciled at the same time. There are nations that apprehend the consequences of autonomy for their integrity and see in federalism a stepping stone for secessionism. Our experience, and yours for that matter, sends a contrary message. Multiple power structures, coexisting and reinforcing each other, is one more indication of respect for choice.

6. Elections in India currently encompass an electorate of almost 700 million. It is a political statistic not easy to digest. Equally worth noting is that these votes have often resulted in changes of Government at both the federal and state level. It is the peaceful transfer of power that is the true test of democracy. Not all societies claiming to be one have passed it. India has- with flying colours! The Indian experiment has broken new ground in many ways. Over the last half century, dissidents - regional, ethnic, religious or socio-economic- have found an accommodating political culture that has aided their return to the mainstream. We have even had occasions when those who took up arms against the Indian State finally joined democratic politics and assumed leadership responsibilities. One testimony to our strength is the example – the first in history – of a Communist Party coming to power through electoral means. In the Indian ethos, no one is outside the pale and we have stretched the definition of an inclusive society to its limits and beyond. Ours is an exercise in continuous management of contradictions. So that we do not take it for granted, perhaps it is useful to reflect just for a moment what could have happened had this experiment not succeeded.

7. The roots that liberal democracy struck in India find some explanation in our tradition of social and religious pluralism. Unlike the West, where the separation of Church and State was a pre-requisite for secularism, its Indian manifestation appears to draw strength from an ethos of multiplicity and choice. The Indian intellectual tradition is an intensely individualistic one, as indeed are many schools of religious and philosophical thought. Secularism in Western intellectual tradition has a clearly non-religious connotation while the Indian understanding, in contrast, translates into equal respect for all religions. Transposed to the political level, it really captures the essence of democracy. It is no accident that the advocates of democracy in India

like Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru were also equally strong proponents of religious equality. Indeed, their vision gained popular acceptance and legitimacy precisely because it specifically addressed the needs thrown up by a complex social structure. They were careful not to fabricate an artificial majority culture in order to create a national identity. They were acutely conscious that in this vast land, everyone is a minority and the difference is only one of degree. The internal balance of a society composed of minorities is distinctly different from one where a dominant majority sets its terms vis-à-vis its minorities. In such a paradigm, tolerance as an attitude is not enough because it appears too grudging and meagre. A stronger embrace of diversity has to be the working principle and its wholehearted acceptance a virtual necessity. We have, admittedly, forces within our society that seek to create a majoritarian culture by reshaping identities and self-perceptions. The reduction of the complexity of India into primitive religious definitions cannot succeed because it runs up against a contrary ground reality. The truth is that our people, secure in their identities, are ready to accept differences and can be non-conformist in their own ways. Diversity has accentuated rather than diminished our nationhood.

8. Democracy and secularism have not only been values that have sustained the development of modern India. They have also provided effective defences against terrorism unleashed by ideologies of intolerance and fundamentalism. India's battle in that regard predates 9/11 and no country has paid a higher price to safeguard its core democratic beliefs. Our ability to rise to this challenge has depended on the denial of ground fertile for the spread of such extremist thinking. This was made possible because all sections of India believed that their grievances can be addressed through the democratic process. Admittedly, we have had difficult experiences where narrower identities have disrupted the social fabric. But in the long run, all communities understand that the Indian state does not discriminate. It is a testimony to the working of our systems that an organization like Al-Qaeda has, to date, not been able to recruit adherents in India. Global efforts at combating terrorism could look at the Indian example and examine whether our political culture has lessons that could be usefully applied elsewhere.

9. Pluralism and individualism are two sides of the same coin and they reflect themselves as much in economic activity as they do in the political. They are responsible for a long tradition of entrepreneurship and artisanship on which we have developed a modern economy that is now making itself felt in the global marketplace. The individualism of India is based on a history of intellectual questioning and challenges to the established system. The description of a million mutinies, even if one were to add zeros to its numbers and subtract from its intensity, speaks of a people in constant ferment. In more rigid societies, this could have had negative repercussions and probably harsh consequences. But India has been able to successfully harness these internal energies and use them as a force of progress. What should be particularly noted is that all the social and educational investments that we have made over the last six decades – from the Institutes of Technology to agricultural institutions – are paying off handsomely today. It is a peculiarity of India that education should emerge as such an effective means of social mobility. By empowering the underclass, education has spread awareness and served as a leveller. Yet, in combination with other skills, it can provide the impetus for growth and wealth. It has fostered a culture of creativity and innovation that has found expression in our IT industry and other aspects of knowledge-based economy. At the same time, India's corporate sector is also busy establishing a reputation for high

quality of standardised management and competitive business practices. Perhaps it takes something as contradictory as India to reconcile the anarchy of its creative endeavours with the discipline of its commitment to rule bound systems.

10. Amartya Sen in his book *The Argumentative Indian* has pointed out that the combination of internal pluralism and external receptivity has determined the Indian identity. Even though they are inextricably linked, the latter tends to be overshadowed by the former. Historically, India has been at the centre of migration of peoples and services. We have long been an importer and exporter of ideas as much as goods. India has always been a sanctuary for those who came out on the wrong side of politics and religion, and remains so to this day. We are a nation of bleeding hearts who wear them on our sleeves. Prof. Sen notes that India has been an integral part of the world in the most interactive sense and that ideological separatism militates against India's own heritage. While they are not without their problems, global processes have enriched India and the world over millennia. This could well explain why Indians have taken positively to the opening of their economy and its gradual integration with the global one. Reforms over the last fifteen years have unleashed a new promise of growth and brought India into global consciousness. The path of accelerated growth has raised a host of issues whose successful resolution can inspire others. To begin with, there are multiple challenges of raising large sections of our population out of poverty while addressing the simultaneous demands of a growing middle class for a better quality of life. One need not necessarily be pursued at the expense of the other and the two may well be linked. Connectivity, quite literally, can be part of the answer. We have gone through what in India has been known as the transistor revolution, followed by the television one and now by the cellular phone. Their cumulative impact in raising awareness and promoting social change is quite astonishing. We have seen their role in rising aspirations that constantly raise the benchmarks for our performance. Modernisation of infrastructure and growing energy needs are two significant constraints on our growth currently. They are the equivalent of hardware and software if we are to continue on this path. It is our hope that having placed our faith in an open economy, the world would respond reciprocally, believing that there is much riding on our success.

11. The expansion of the Indian economy and its closer linkages with the global one also has profound regional repercussions. Within South Asia itself, India with a 7-8% growth rate is clearly the motor of development and many of its neighbours can reap benefits by taking advantage of expanding opportunities. Obviously, this is a choice that they themselves have to make and some have done so. Sri Lanka, which has the strongest economic linkages with India, has been posting impressive growth statistics despite its domestic difficulties. Similarly, Bhutan has emerged as a major energy provider and the resulting revenues have sharply boosted its per capita income. Nepal derives significant income from its large migrant population in India. Others have the same options if they wish to exercise it, whether in trade, energy or even in infrastructure. Public sentiment in the region as a whole appears to strongly favour the economic logic, as all of us see an improvement in living standards as the main priority. As a result, the basis for constructive dialogue within the region is widening and new options to long-standing problems emerging in a way that could not have been anticipated earlier. In such a situation, national borders may not retain the salience that they currently have in the region. Our future clearly lies in building a vibrant and dynamic economic community. Beyond South Asia, the reforming Indian economy is steadily reaching out to the ASEAN on the east and to

the Gulf on the west, restoring historical linkages snapped during the colonial era. The achievements of an open economy when set against the temper of an open society, foster pride without jingoism. Perhaps, this reflects the tradition of external receptivity mentioned earlier, but in itself, is a point worth noting.

12. An India benefiting from global processes will naturally be encouraged to contribute more to the international community. We have a record of doing our best even in the past when our means were far more limited. Today, India can bear much greater responsibilities. We have historically been major contributors to UN peacekeeping operations and will continue to remain so. During the tsunami last year, we were active as well in extending relief efforts to our neighbouring countries even while coping with our own problems back home. India is also emerging as an aid provider to countries in greater need and we seek to make our human resources training capacity available to others where possible. We are now in the forefront of fashioning responses to trans-national challenges as well in areas like health, terrorism and WMD proliferation. Only recently, we have partnered the US in important initiatives in these areas and have taken the lead in launching the UN Democracy Fund. Through these activities, India has demonstrated its character as a responsible state. A telling recognition of our record came in July this year when the United States agreed to resume nuclear energy cooperation taking into account our exemplary non-proliferation record. In putting forward our candidature for permanent membership of the UN Security Council, we are confident that the world will take into account our international contribution as well as our strong democratic credentials.

13. It is apparent that over the next decade, the major countries influencing the direction of global development would include the United States, the EU, Russia, Japan, China, and India. No country, however powerful, can shoulder global burdens in their entirety. India's objective is to establish the best of ties with these five key nations and we have succeeded to considerable measure. The United States has been an important focus of our efforts at reshaping the diplomatic landscape. Landmark agreements reached in July have the potential to fundamentally redefine our ties. Understandings in the field of energy, technology access, investment and trade, agriculture and health are testimony to a rapidly broadening agenda of cooperation. Our relationship has begun to translate into a larger global partnership. The EU, like the US, is an important source of trade, technology, and investment. The ambit of our cooperation is steadily expanding and we have strengthened our political understanding. Russia is a traditional friend and remains a major partner in security, defence, and technology. We share a strong interest in combating fundamentalist terrorism. Our ties with Japan are growing in substance and are particularly relevant to addressing infrastructural challenges. We are committed to ensuring the security of sea lanes as well. China, our largest neighbour, is a nation with whom we have had a history that has not been easy. Both countries have taken a forward-looking approach and our trade, in particular, has expanded dramatically. With each of these partners, our relationship will grow depending on how they contribute to peace and stability in South Asia, respond to India's core concerns, and meet our larger aspirations.

14. An inter-dependent world requires a more consensual decision-making process. We can arrive at cooperative management only if there is an agreement on fundamentals. Learning from each other and exchanging best practices can be rewarding for all of us. India's record and experience allows it to make a significant

contribution to this debate. We represent the importance of choice. Our pursuit of development has not been at the cost of human freedoms. India exists because of its moderation and preference for the middle path. We are a society at different levels simultaneously, and probably confusing to those comfortable in less dimensions. We have our warts but equally, a capability for internal correctives. Understanding India requires patience, but those who do value our durability and sustainability. India is a constant exercise in introspection that does not always lead to definitive conclusions. For all these reasons and more, our joining the front ranks of global powers will be a harmonious process, greeted not by apprehension but more by warmth and perhaps some curiosity. The argument for India is that argumentative people, difficult as they are, embody virtues and habits make the world a better and safer place.

15. In his *Discovery of India*, written from a prison in 1945, Jawaharlal Nehru spoke of India in these terms: "We are citizens of no mean country and we are proud of the land of our birth, of our people, our culture and traditions. That pride should not be for a romanticized past to which we want to cling: nor should it encourage exclusiveness or want of appreciation of other ways than ours. It must never allow us to forget our many weaknesses and failings or blunt our longing to be rid of them..... It was India's way in the past to welcome and absorb other cultures. That is much more necessary today, for we march to the one world of tomorrow where national cultures will be intermingled with the international culture of the human race. We shall, therefore, seek wisdom and knowledge and friendship and comradeship Thus, we shall remain true Indians and Asiatics, and become at the same time, good internationalists and world citizens". That message is as true today as it was 60 years ago. And these aspirations are in many ways our strongest argument.

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