



A speech by
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It is a privilege to be here today with all of you. Thank you for the work you are doing to promote and protect freedom and democracy in India. The quality and quantity of participants today is a testimony to the widespread interest in addressing these issues in thoughtful, innovative, and positive ways. I would like particularly to extend my thanks and appreciation to all of today's speakers and to the Policy Institute for Religion and State and the University of Leicester, UK for organizing this program.

The tensions in our world today demand that governments, academics, activists, and local populations dialogue and discuss the issues and work together to bring resolution to problems. Nuclear issues, religion and politics, socio-economic development, and US-India trade relations are of great importance and will have tremendous influence on the international community. The upcoming elections in India present an opportunity – one that can lead to the further protection of basic freedoms and democracy, or one that can lead to further oppression and injustice on a local and national level.

Like many of you, over the past few years, I have read with horror the stories of attacks on Muslims, Christians, Dalits and other religious and ethnic minorities. Like you, I wonder what drives people to attack other people who peacefully practice their religious beliefs. Sadly, it is clear from numerous reports that extremism in India is growing stronger and forming deeper roots in the society and government.

In January of this year, I visited India with four of my colleagues. We had a wonderful time exploring India, and meeting with community and government leaders. I deeply appreciate the work of our colleagues in government and those with NGOs who love their nation and seek to improve the situation of those who face suffering of any type.

While we were there, we also saw the brutality of the extremists at work as we heard report after report of the VHP, RSS, and other groups working together to attack Muslims, Christians, Dalits, and Buddhists. We visited Ahmedabad, Gujarat, and viewed the burned out home of Mr. Ehsan Jaffrey, the well-respected former Member of Parliament who had been burned to death in his home along with seventy-two women and children seeking shelter there from the extremist mobs. In front of his home, women were raped and children were burned alive as attackers threw them on bonfires as the mobs rampaged through the streets. Sadly, there has been no real justice for many of the families affected by this violence.

Despite the brutal attacks and killings against religious and ethnic minorities, they have decided to respond with courage and conviction. Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Dalits are working together to build communal harmony to prevent the tragic massacres of Gujarat from happening again. Our delegation had the honor of participating in a ceremony in which we handed over keys to new homes to those in the Muslim community who had been displaced by the 2002 Gujarat riots. It was a great privilege to see the joy on families' faces as they received those keys and were able to begin life anew in their new homes.

India is a nation of great and wonderful diversity, yet there are those, some in powerful positions, who would seek to impose homogeneity on the country. Tragically, they fail to appreciate that India's democracy is built on diversity and the ingenuity and productivity that comes from that diversity. As we gather today, shortly before India's elections, it is vital that we work together to ensure that India's future is one of communal harmony, hope, peace, and prosperity and not of suffering and oppression.

It is clear that countries which protect the rights and freedoms of all people in their lands are more stable *and* more prosperous. But, freedom, stability, and prosperity do not come with passive concern. We must take action. We must educate ourselves on the problems – educate those around us, and let other governments know that we are concerned about their people. As some of us are outsiders, we must work with groups who know the people and culture of the region. We must work together for none of us can accomplish anything on our own. My hope is that today's seminar and the ensuing discussions will result in thoughtful, compassionate, practical recommendations for the people of India and the international community, to address solutions together. Again, it is an honor to be here with all of you. Thank you.