

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

**ADDRESS**

**BY**

**MR AMITAV BANERJI**

**DIRECTOR AND HEAD OF THE COMMONWEALTH  
SECRETARY-GENERAL'S OFFICE**

**AT THE**

**OFFICIAL OPENING OF**

**THE THIRD *DIVERSITY MATTERS* FORUM**

**ON**

Sir James Gobbo,  
Mr Hass Dellal,  
Mr Ravindra Kumar,  
Distinguished Delegates,  
Ladies and Gentlemen

Allow me, at the outset, to express my sincere appreciation to the Australian Multicultural Foundation for organising this event and to thank you for the honour accorded to the Commonwealth Secretariat through the invitation to open this meeting.

Let me also thank our Indian hosts, and *The Statesman* in particular, for the wonderful welcome, friendship and support that we have received since our arrival.

Thank you also to the many other organisations supporting this Forum, including two sister Commonwealth ones – the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit.

I bring you warm greetings and best wishes from the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Don McKinnon. The role of civil society in the Commonwealth is dear to his heart; the Commonwealth is, of course, an association of governments, but is ultimately a community of peoples.

It is only fitting that this Forum should be taking place in a country – and in a city -- which, in so many ways, epitomise diversity. In this country – as in this great metropolis -- you will find it hard to discover something devoid of diversity – whether it is physical geography, ethnic, linguistic or religious groupings, standards of living, or culinary styles and sartorial customs.

There is one India – and many Indias within it – making up a very rich and intricate mosaic. This India, the Commonwealth's largest member state, has shown the world how even a developing country can, through its strong democratic and secular traditions, harness its diversity and build a united and dynamic nation.

The secret lies, perhaps, in one of Mahatma Gandhi's oft-quoted sayings – *I*

equality and good governance; a catalyst for global consensus building, and a source of assistance for development and poverty eradication.

This is our mission statement.

A cynic once remarked: *the Commonwealth has nothing in common and no wealth!* Whatever else may be said to counter that view, we can certainly maintain that the Commonwealth has diversity in common and that in diversity also lies its wealth.

Diversity to us is both an article of faith and a source of strength. It is an integral to an association which spans the entire globe, with 1.8 billion people, straddling every continent and representing every social group.

Diversity makes the Commonwealth a unique mosaic. Consensual decision making renders the association even more special.

It is therefore crucial that diversity in our societies is seen as a strength, not a liability; that is appreciated, not deprecated; and that it is honoured and not hounded.

The theme of this Third Forum is religious diversity and it is aimed at identifying multi-faith initiatives as a way of bringing about a shared vision for integration and cohesion in society. I am sure that, over the next two days, you will have informed debates and bring to bear both intellectual insights as well as practical perspectives on the important issues before you, which will form the basis of a consensus on establishing a multi-faith advisory group.

The bridging of religious divides is a crying need in a world where fanaticism and fundamentalism are spreading their ugly tentacles. It is imperative that this Forum aim at deepening understanding between and about faiths, in order that, not just centuries-old but 21<sup>st</sup> century misconceptions, suspicions and prejudices can be laid to rest. And your deliberations can and must also respond positively to the growing dialogue and co-operation between different faiths on public issues.

Indeed, Commonwealth leaders took a lead in this regard more than three

been to apply, to use the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, a *touch of healing* where possible, through the 'good offices' role of the Secretary-General. This is our primary mechanism for prevention and resolution of conflicts within our member states, so as to provide an environment conducive to political, social and economic development.

It is gratifying to note that 'good offices' interventions have been deployed across the Commonwealth with resounding success. There is no stronger evidence of this, than the fact that more and more countries seek such assistance.

Let me conclude with a quote from Nelson Mandela, arguably the greatest living personality of our time. Asked soon after he became the first President of a democratic South Africa in 1994 about the role of the Commonwealth, which had been involved in peace efforts during the transition in Kwazulu Natal and had a presence in the constitutional negotiations, he replied: *The Commonwealth makes the world safe for diversity.*

No tribute could ever be greater.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have great pleasure in opening this conference and wish you success in your deliberations.

Thank you.

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