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Address by
Mr Koichiro Matsuura

Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the inaugural ceremony
of the International Colloquium on the Indus Valley Civilization

Islamabad, Pakistan, 6 April 2001

Mr Chairman,
Distinguished Ministers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I very much welcome this opportunity to be with you today for the opening of this International Colloquium on the Indus Valley Civilization. The authorities of Pakistan are to be commended for taking this initiative.

It is particularly opportune that this meeting should be held at this time. This United Nations Year for Dialogue among Civilizations, of which your meeting is one of the flagship events, is one to which UNESCO, among the organizations of the United Nations system, is fully committed. This was, I believe, strongly demonstrated when I launched the Year, in New York, along with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and the Co-initiator, President Khatami of Iran, with a Round Table of Heads of State and Government whose debates underlined the overwhelming importance attached by the international community to the improvement of our reciprocal knowledge of, and appreciation for, each other's cultures as a way of consolidating the foundations of world peace.

Before such eminent specialists gathered here, whose intellectual and academic qualifications far surpass my own, I feel it appropriate to dwell, for my part, on the significance of your theme for the overall debate taking place concerning dialogue among civilizations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The discovery in the early 1920s of a great urban civilization on the banks of the Indus was a cultural sensation that had far-reaching implications.

The number, size and modernity of the cities in the Indus Valley astonished the intellectual community and raised numerous questions, some of which have not yet been resolved. Moenjodaro, Harappa, Kot-diji, Mehrgarh: the names of these cities and sites now echo in the collective imagination and in the minds of intellectuals alike as "benchmarks of civilization".

Here was indeed a major discovery, that of a civilization that was to prove to be one of the world's greatest and oldest. It certainly had a major influence in Asia. It is understandably, then, a crucial part of our understanding of the world history of humankind.

Right from the start, the discovery of the Indus civilization therefore raised two major issues that lie at the heart of all thinking on the dialogue of civilizations. Was it a continuation of other civilizations, in particular those of Mesopotamia? Or did it draw its underlying force from its birth out of a local culture?

The Pakistani archaeologist Rafiq Mughal was the first to observe that the birth of the earliest major urban civilization in South Asia therefore took place most certainly on the soil of the Indus independently of any direct influence from other regions. After much research, including the excavations at Mehghar by Mr Jean-François Jarrige, whose presence here I warmly welcome, the Indus Valley archaeological epic, probably one of the finest in the history of archaeology, has confirmed the accuracy of Rafiq Mughal's work.

Geography, history, culture – everything shows that something happened here that is of great importance for our understanding of the mechanisms, processes and interactions of the dialogue among cultures and civilizations. If we can pierce the mystery of the language, writing and original settlers of the Indus, we might even perhaps eventually rethink our entire conception of Eurasian civilizations.

I find it interesting, in this context, to note that the Indus civilization was both the setting and the expression for two major interactions. First of all, the peoples of the Indus valley interacted with their natural environment. The big issue facing those peoples from time immemorial has always been to confront and resolve the problems raised by the Indus river system, one of the mightiest in the world, to cope with its annual flow and erosive power and also its capacity to fertilize the soil and permit the germination and growth of crops.

It is through the responses found to these challenges that life developed, that forms of cultural expression evolved, that gods, rituals and myths were conceived, that social structures took on form and meaning and that political power became established.

On that basis, cultural and human interactions, the other major advance in the dialogue of civilizations, took place in the Indus region. Initially, nomadic and sedentary lifestyles depended on the rhythms and shifting course of the river and on the complementarity of highlands and plains. It was also in this evolving context that the Indus became such a decisive source of dialogue, as a great corridor for communication and commercial, cultural and human exchanges between the Near East, Central Asia and the Indo-Gangetic region.

Coins, tablets and seals from the Indus have been discovered in Mesopotamia, making it possible to map out the routes followed by people, ideas and goods. The Indus civilization is therefore an excellent expression of the dialectic of dialogue, with its two-way movement, its points of contact and cross-fertilization, that UNESCO is seeking to promote.

I believe that is important for our understanding of each other. No civilization is “pure”. We are all rooted in cultures and civilizations that have fed and enriched themselves through this cross-fertilization. If one of the successes of this UN Year were to be greater recognition of this fact, I would be happy. What a factor in reduction of tension that would be, as peoples realized that centuries-old “enemies” had a shared past and a common will to shape the future.

This colloquium is, by its theme and the calibre of its participants, indeed well set, therefore, to cast light on the common heritage that the Indus civilization represents for all the peoples and countries of the region. As I say, here we touch upon the fundamental purpose of the dialogue of civilizations: to permit, by the shared re-appropriation of a heritage, the rewriting of a common history and the uncovering of what unites people; and to promote mutual understanding and lay the foundations for peace, not only by fostering mutual knowledge, but above all by recognizing interactions, mutual contributions and signs of cross-fertilization.

The ultimate goal of the Islamabad colloquium is, through the shining example of the Indus civilization, to draw attention to the fruitful dialectic of respect for cultural pluralism and recognition of a common heritage as the basis for a genuine dialogue of civilizations. It is through this respect and this recognition that the peoples of the region, in all the diversity of their beliefs and values, will themselves become the defenders and champions of a common physical and intangible heritage whose richness is universally recognized.

The tragedy of the destruction of the Bamiyan monuments underlines the urgency of this “cultural ethic”. And I am convinced that it is through education alone, that such an ethic can be built in the minds of men and women. For the tragedy of Bamiyan is the tragedy of a religious fanaticism that has blossomed on the bed of ignorance.

This is why UNESCO’s fight to achieve education for all is so intrinsically bound up with its fight to preserve the cultural heritage, itself indissociable from the dialogue among civilizations so rightly given prominence by your

colloquium and commemorated throughout the world during this United Nations Year.

I wish you every success for your deliberations.

Thank you.