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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
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Address by
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on the occasion of the opening ceremony of the
International Conference on
“Dialogue among Civilizations:
The Quest for New Perspectives”

New Delhi, 9 July 2003

Prime Minister Vajpayee,
Dr Joshi, Minister of Human Resource Development,
Senator Singhvi,
Ministers,
Delegates and Scholars,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today and to address this distinguished gathering. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the Indian Government for hosting and co-organizing this event with UNESCO. I am delighted that His Excellency, Prime Minister Vajpayee, is with us here this morning; I look forward to his remarks with keen interest. In addition, I would like to take this opportunity to pay warm tribute to Minister Joshi for his support for this event, his active interest in its agenda and his concern for its success. I would also like to express my thanks to all Ministers and all delegates and participants who have accepted our joint invitation.

It is highly appropriate that UNESCO and the Indian Government should come together here, at Vigyan Bhawan in New Delhi, around this theme of “Dialogue Among Civilizations: The Quest for New Perspectives.” In 1956, UNESCO’s Ninth General Conference was the first international conference to be held in this centre. At the meeting, UNESCO’s General Conference adopted the initiative for the “Major Project on Mutual Appreciation of Eastern and Western Cultural Values,” which was a precursor of the “Dialogue Among Civilizations” initiative that brings us here today. That important step towards intercultural dialogue was brought to UNESCO with the strong support of the Indian Government under Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

As this case illustrates in regard to the idea of “dialogue among civilizations”, practice may come before concept. We in UNESCO believe that, from its very beginning, the Organization has been engaged in promoting this dialogue, even though it went under other names.

It is important to recognize that, once the Cold War came to an end, new tensions, uncertainties and conflicts began to appear on the international scene. Many people attempted to attribute the growth of the ‘new international insecurity’ to the clash of civilizations, and some predicted that a major clash would ensue. But others argued that, to prevent the recurrence of such conflicts and uncertainties, we must promote dialogue.

Against this background, let me draw your attention to several important developments through which the promotion of dialogue has taken place. In November 1998, the UN General Assembly, in a resolution sponsored by the Islamic Republic of Iran, proclaimed the year 2001 as the “United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations”. On the eve of the Millennium Assembly in September 2000, I organized, in cooperation with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, a Round Table of Heads of State on the Dialogue among Civilizations at UN Headquarters in New York as well as a Round Table of Eminent Persons. These occasions, which set in motion the celebration of the UN Year, signaled high-level interest in this theme as well as UNESCO’s strong commitment to promoting intercultural dialogue.

During the UN Year itself, many meetings and exchanges took place which explored the meaning of dialogue and its importance for building peace and mutual understanding. For example, the conference held in Vilnius, Lithuania, in April 2001 provided a memorable opportunity for regional leaders and representatives to discuss key issues. This opportunity occurred again, on the other side of the world, when UNESCO and the United Nations University organized an international conference on the theme of dialogue among civilizations in Tokyo in July 2001.

I mention these occasions to remind us all that the process of cultivating dialogue among civilizations preceded the shocking and tragic events of 11th September 2001, which served as a brutal illustration of the dangers lurking in our globalizing world. These horrific events alerted everyone to the presence of new threats to international peace and the existence of gaps of understanding and fellow-feeling that are extremely disturbing.

In early November 2001, UNESCO’s General Conference agreed a resolution on the fight against terrorism and, significantly, also adopted the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which has many implications for promoting intercultural dialogue and preserving cultural diversity in all regions of the world. Later that same month, the UN General Assembly voted for the resolution establishing the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations. This Global Agenda provides the framework within which all of our actions in support of dialogue are taking place.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The task before us in our meeting is to search for new perspectives on dialogue among civilizations in light of events and developments occurring at the start of the twenty-first century. Let me stress that this is not a quest for newness for its own sake. It is not our intention to abandon the wisdom of the past or to underestimate the virtues and skills which, for example, have enabled India to create, out of its diverse mixture of ethnic, religious and linguistic groups, the largest democratic nation in the world. Instead, it is to recognize that the world is changing before our eyes. New challenges and threats are emerging which increasingly are not amenable to traditional approaches and methods.

As a result, we must broaden the scope of our dialogue. As fresh problems and obstacles arise, such as new forms of stigmatization, discrimination and ignorance that impede mutual respect and understanding, governments and their partners are called upon to respond in ways that are relevant and effective. We must seek new perspectives on dialogue and new modalities for conducting it. In this, we must not be afraid to be innovative and creative.

In my remarks to you today, I shall not be prescriptive. I do not presume to know the answers to all the questions before us. But perhaps I know some of the questions. I mention the following as examples: there are many more!

First, how can education help to develop and conduct a long-term dialogue between cultures and civilizations while ensuring the participation of all in such dialogue?

Second, how can we ensure that science and technology effectively promote equitable forms of intercultural dialogue and exchange when so many developing countries lack the capacities to fully participate in the building of knowledge societies?

Third, how can we increase the role of the mass media in regard to the dialogue among civilizations through a strengthening of press freedom and freedom of expression?

Fourth, who can legitimately speak for a particular civilization or culture? Whose voice counts? In whose name is the dialogue conducted?

Fifth, through which types of people, institutions and processes can the dialogue among civilizations be best advanced? Through politicians?

Through religious leaders? Through artists? Through scientists? Through children? Through schools? Through trade? Through the Internet?

These are open-ended questions that do not presume particular answers. It is in this spirit that the dialogue should be conducted. The search for new perspectives and modalities needs to be as open as possible. After all, the greatest enemy of dialogue is a closed mind.

In regard to the dialogue among civilizations, my perspective from UNESCO convinces me of three important things. First, I believe that the new approaches to dialogue need to be rooted in concrete expressions of human interaction, not just in general agreements on principles. We must move from talking about dialogue to actual engagement in dialogue on matters of substantive concern – for example, on practical matters such as intercultural exchanges and tourism; the management of trans-boundary freshwater resources; the handling of issues in bioethics; or regional approaches to curriculum renewal and textbook revision.

Second, the new approaches and modalities are most likely to be found in those fields of human endeavour where the interface between knowledge and ignorance, between understanding and prejudice, is most acute. I believe that this interface is especially evident in precisely those areas covered by UNESCO's fields of competence – education, the sciences, culture and communication. Here, the ethical and intellectual terms of debate are highly attuned to the character and needs of intercultural dialogue. Furthermore, it may well be at the junctures between these fields – for example, between education and science, between culture and technology, between social science and communication – that the most fruitful interactions can take place.

Third, for these reasons, I believe that UNESCO is the agency best placed within the UN system to help the dialogue among civilizations move into a new phase of development, through a broad-based collaboration with Member States, other members of the UN family, civil society, the scientific, artistic and academic communities, and other partners. UNESCO stands ready to provide the nurturing environment in which a new global dialogue can flourish.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To engage in dialogue is to lay oneself open to others, and this involves risk. It is necessary to accept this risk if one wishes to reap the rewards of dialogue. The attempt to understand someone else requires an act of imaginative sympathy which is the obverse of hatred, distrust and

prejudice. The latter are forms of imaginative antipathy. I believe that these two types of “imagining” are quite different in how they work. To reject and hate the other is easy; it requires no great effort or risk. But to reach out to the other, to embrace the other, and to invite the other to understand you in return – these require a form of courage because one thereby enters the territory of the unknown.

These thoughts lead me, as is often the case, to UNESCO’s Constitution, which begins with the following famous statement: “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”. To engage in dialogue and to seek and promote mutual understanding are to build the defences of peace in the minds of men. This is UNESCO’s mission and one which is shared by people of goodwill everywhere.

At a gathering of this magnitude, there is the chance for a large number of countries to listen to one another, exchange proposals, devise solutions and send out a clear and positive message. I believe that this Conference is a real opportunity to identify new perspectives, approaches and methods that will help to deepen and widen the scope of global interaction in the twenty-first century. In our deliberations, we must seek fresh inspiration that may take the form of a forward-looking declaration that would guide our future work, especially in undertaking the crucial task of putting ideas into practice. Future international efforts will certainly require stronger commitment to tolerance and dialogue between different faiths, cultures and civilizations. Let us therefore resolve to work together to bring our hopes for peace, dialogue and tolerance to fruition.

Thank you.