



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

“The Task Before the League of Nations”

Adjournment of the Session Speech to the League of Nations

Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan

October 6, 1937

Geneva, Switzerland

Ladies and gentlemen,

Your work for the time being is at an end. But I have still a duty to perform.

As President it falls to me - and neither I nor you will look upon it as a mere formality - to voice the deep gratitude of the delegations here assembled, and my own, to the distinguished Secretary-General, M Avenol, and his staff for their arduous labours. To the officials who have been attached to the Presidential office I am under great personal obligation. Their help has been invaluable to me, and I take this opportunity of thanking them warmly. Thanks to them and thanks to you, ladies and gentlemen, my task has indeed been light and pleasant.

And now let me pass in review the much heavier task that has been yours.

Your task this year was of a three-fold character. In the humanitarian fields, the Assembly has striven, however unpropitious the circumstances, to stimulate the work of the League organisations. That work is ceaseless and of almost infinite variety. Almost everything that administers to man's well-being - the great problems of health and transit, of intellectual co-operation, of penal and penitentiary reform, and of the suppression of the traffic in dangerous drugs - all these and many others come within the League's purview. But despite the variety of its activity it is all inspired by a single principle — the service of humanity. Everywhere, the League gives proof of its anxiety to serve. It places its resources for investigation and execution and all the great experience it has gained in seventeen years of toil and research, at the service of every Government, whether a Member of the League or not, and at the service of the world as a whole.

To many, the crushing difficulties of our times seem to put any solution, indeed any alleviation, of the world's malaise beyond our present reach. I for one set my face steadfastly against such an attitude of despair and pessimism. The League has done mankind true service in embarking on its difficult and realistic survey of the world's problems in economics and finance. Some may argue that such exchanges of opinion cannot be called results. I differ. In the present state of the world, when the ball of responsibility is cast backwards and forwards between politics and economics, the frank ventilation of views by the representatives of so many nations is of living importance. In our discussions, general permanent principles have

The use of materials published on The Institute of Ismaili Studies website indicates an acceptance of The Institute of Ismaili Studies' Conditions of Use. Each copy of the item must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed by each transmission. For all published work, it is best to assume you should ask both the original authors and the publishers for permission to (re)use information and always credit the authors and source of the information.



gradually emerged and been confirmed. Here are being well and truly laid the foundations for future negotiations, which will give those principles concrete form.

The division of responsibility between economics and politics is indeed one of the most difficult dilemmas with which we are confronted. "Give me a sound economic position, and I will pursue a sound policy", says the Statesman. "How can I pursue a sound policy", says the Economist, "if you do not give me a sound political position?" The Assembly has declined to impale itself on the horns of this pessimistic dilemma. And rightly. What the present conditions allow it to do in the economic sphere, it has done. What those conditions allow it to do in the political sphere it has done likewise. Grasping its opportunities, facing its responsibilities, it has set itself unflinchingly to those grave problems which today beset the international community. And of this, our debates on the Spanish problem, on mandates and the grave situation in China are eloquent proof.

That is the second aspect of your work this session. Let me turn to the third. Your enquiry into the application of the principles of the Covenant reveals the Assembly's awareness of the need of the League to adapt itself to the ever-changing conditions involved by its own growth. Adversaries of the League who find in every new difficulty fresh reason for doubting it, and impatient friends who look upon those difficulties as reasons for asking of it too much, alike ignore the significance of one all-significant fact — the very existence of the League.

Remember how the League came into being just after the war, when everything was in disorder. How it passed through the vicissitudes of crisis after crisis - political, economic and other - crises not of the League's own making but the inevitable inescapable aftermath of pre-war, pre-League conditions. Remember all it has done in seventeen short years for the gradual rebuilding of a devastated world, and how, never losing sight of its objectives, it has yet displayed enough flexibility to preserve its ideal intact through all opposition. Think of all this, and then say whether we are not verily right in paying homage and service to the League.

Were I asked how I myself conceive the League's mission in the world I should answer in the words of the great Saadi: "The children of Adam, created of the self-same clay, are members of one body. When one member suffers, all members suffer likewise. O thou who art indifferent to the sufferings of thy fellow, thou art unworthy to be called man". Or I might borrow the words of a wise Hindu poet-philosopher: "All peoples in the world are to me even as my nearest kin and kith". Or the final blessing at a Hindu service: "Let there be peace! Let there be prosperity!" The agelong experience of India had, indeed, taught its children that prosperity without peace was an impossibility; that war meant want, peace meant plenty. Even so may it be with the League of Nations.

Indeed, all the problems that fall to the League may ultimately be reduced to one — that of man, and the dignity of man. It is in that sense that the work of the League assumes its true significance and acquires its permanent value. The tribulations of one people are the tribulations of all. That which weakens one weakens all. That which is a gain to one is surely a gain to all. This is no empty ideal. It is a veritable compass to guide aright the efforts of



statesmen in every country and of all men of good will who, desiring the good of their own people, desire the good of the whole world.

And now for the present, my task is over. In the circumstances in which we separate, I may not wish you farewell, but with all my heart I wish you — God-speed.

I declare the session adjourned.