

Speech of Smt. Margaret Alva

H.E. the Governor of Uttarakhand

Presidential Address on the occasion of the
2nd B.D. Pande Memorial Lecture

Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi Paryavaran Shiksha Sansthan, Almora 26 March, 2011

His Excellency the Vice President of India and Chief Guest of today's function, Shri Hamid Ansari ji, Mantri ji, Chairman of Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi Paryavaran Shiksha Sansthan Shri Arun Singh, Members of the Governing Body Shri Suman Dubey, Dr. HC Pathak, Dr. BK Joshi, Manini Chatterji, Secretary of USNPSS Shri Lalit Pande; Shri Arvind Pande and Smt. Mrinal Pande, Distinguished Guests, Representatives of the media, Ladies and Gentlemen. Warm greetings to each one of you on the occasion of the 2nd B.D. Pande Memorial Lecture.

We are privileged to have with us today, H.E. Shri M. Hamid Ansari ji, a writer, scholar, former vice chancellor, a distinguished diplomat and above all, an excellent human being, to deliver this Lecture. He brings with him a wealth of experience, having handled a wide and impressive range of assignments in a career spanning over 45 years. It is a pleasure and an honour for me, to welcome you, Vice President Sir, to this beautiful State of Uttarakhand.

On this occasion, I pay my tributes to the late B.D. Pande, I.C.S., who was Cabinet Secretary, Governor West Bengal and Punjab, and had distinguished himself as one of the great administrators of India. After a distinguished civil service career of almost five decades, he founded the Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi and Paryavaran Shiksha Sansthan and served society for another two decades as its Chairman. This organization has since its inception, contributed to environmental education in schools and carrying it to rural communities in the hill districts of Uttarakhand.

Nature has bestowed Uttarakhand with beautiful mountains, forests, rivers and lakes and a variety of birds and animals. It abounds in rich traditional knowledge and wisdom in the conservation of nature and its resources. Religious beliefs, culture and folklore have together taught our people to treat nature and the environment as sacred. Conservation and protection of the environment have, therefore, been part and parcel of the local ethos and mindset.

Uttarakhand's quality of life as well as the level of public awareness is at par with or even higher than any State in the country. The young State has been able to achieve an economic growth rate of above nine percent, in the first decade of its existence. Perhaps its smaller base has helped in faster growth. But the Himalayas being geologically young mountains are fragile and prone to shifts and pressures, causing natural disasters. As the size of the economy grows and populations shift, will it be able to sustain its fragile environment? That is the big question before us today.

The second issue which I would like to flag, concerns the saving of our biodiversity, which is a big asset, and fundamental to long-term growth. Unsustainable human activities are causing loss of precious biodiversity at a rate many times higher than the natural rate of extinction of species. There is, therefore, a compelling need to work towards conservation of the Himalayan diversity and mobilise individual and collective efforts to stop the wave of its extinction.

Against the backdrop of climate change, environmental degradation, and the crippling extremes of wealth and poverty in Uttarakhand, there is now a felt need for a transformation from a craze of unfettered consumerism to a culture of sustainability.

Women are particularly vulnerable to ecological and environmental damage, as this adversely impacts the conditions of their livelihoods and work load. Given that women have such high stakes in protecting their environment, which provides the essentials of food, fuel, fodder and water, it makes no sense, that development plans allow them little or no voice in shaping policies for their own welfare, forcing them into positions of 'participatory exclusion'.

It is gratifying to note that this concept is gaining momentum in large parts of the State through the efforts of civil society and voluntary organizations, such as the Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi Paryavaran Shiksha Sansthan, which I understand, has taken up innovative programmes involving rural communities. The organization's initiatives in providing economic, social

and environmental inputs to ensure a smooth transition to sustainable development are praiseworthy.

By emphasizing the linkages between sustainable development objectives, education, institutional capacity building, participation of women, and application of indigenous knowledge, it has created an environment for their acceptance. Among other things, I have noted with great interest the USNPSS' initiative of establishing the Uttarakhand Mahila Parishad, with its activities in villages for training women on their rights, issues relating to panchayats, MANREGA, health, and their own leadership.

I hope that through consultation with the stakeholders, Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi Paryavaran Shiksha Sansthan will continue to further respond to the challenges facing the rural communities, particularly in the hilly regions of the State. With these words, I once again extend my good wishes to each one of you, involved in this great enterprise of our common survival, every success.

Thank you!

JAI HIND!