

“Why now is the best time to be young”: speech by Sir James Bevan, British High Commissioner, at Jamia Milia University, New Delhi, 22 August 2013.

Dear students,

it's easy to be a pessimist. But let me try this afternoon to show you that the pessimists are wrong. That not only is this a good time to be alive but that it's the best of all times to be alive. In particular, I want to convince you that it's the best of all times to be what you are: to be young and Indian at the start of the 21st century.

Let us consider a few facts. Today, we are not only healthier and longer-living. We are richer than ever before. The average human now earns three times as much than 50 years ago. As prosperity grows, poverty is going down: the percentage of the world's people living in absolute poverty has dropped by more than half in my lifetime. India has been at the forefront of the battle against poverty - nearly 90% of Indians lived in absolute poverty in the 1940s; today that figure is now down to around 30%.

But I would argue that as young Indians today, you have truly won the lottery! Why? Because India possesses advantages many other countries don't. India has the money, the people and the resources to do everything. Ambition, energy, talent: Indians have them in industrial quantities. Let us also think of its history: a country with a long history like India knows how to do things – because it's done most of them already in the thousands of years that have gone before. And a country with a rich civilisation like India can be confident of meeting any future challenge - because it's successfully met all the challenges of the past. Let's think of knowledge: the value that Indian civilisation has always placed on knowledge is evident today. So too is the commitment of every Indian parent at every level to get the best possible education for their child: and a society that invests heavily in its children is a society with a bright future. There's one final advantage that India has today over many other places: optimism itself. Whatever the media or the politicians in Delhi say, almost every Indian I meet in the Real India believes that while today is good, tomorrow will be better.

So I am very confident about this country's future. I encourage you to be too – because it's not me who is going to build this country's future: it's you.