

“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. You can point to any number of problems that make life difficult and the future uncertain. But let me try this afternoon to persuade 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. Fred Astaire, the great Hollywood dancer, was once asked in his later years what he thought of growing old. He said that it was better than the alternative. And of course being alive at any time is preferable to the alternative. But I would suggest that being alive in 2013 is better than at any time in the past. Let us consider a few facts.

The first condition of a good life is good health. And in 2013 we humans are healthier than ever before. We are better fed: the percentage of undernourished people in the world, which was nearly 20% ten years ago, is 10% today. Fewer mothers now die in childbirth and fewer children die in childhood. We are living longer than ever before. A thousand years ago, the average person lived to the age of twenty. Ever since then life expectancy has been rising. The world average is now 67. Life expectancy in your country, which was just 26 in 1950, is now 72.

Secondly, we have greater freedoms than ever before. For most of human history, most people did not get to choose their rulers. That was true even one hundred years ago. But today, after the great wave of decolonisation and the collapse of totalitarian states in Europe, democracy is the standard. It is the countries that are **not** democracies that are now the odd ones out. Indeed we have more choice than ever before, not just in deciding which government we want, but in everything. Today most of us are free to choose where we live, what we study, what job we do, what we buy in the shops, who we marry, what clothes we wear, what we do with our leisure time.

Choice may sometimes be bewildering. But like old age, it's better than the alternative.