

# Indian Muslim Council calls for strengthening India's secular democracy

SUMAN GUHA MOZUMDER

A convention of the Indian Muslim Council-USA, attended by scholars from other religious communities, in Chicago last week heard calls for reclaiming modern India's true past and promoting pluralism and a truly multi-religious and multi-cultural society.

Both speakers and delegates dubbed the second annual convention of the group, founded in 2002, as a landmark in communal harmony among the Indian Diaspora.

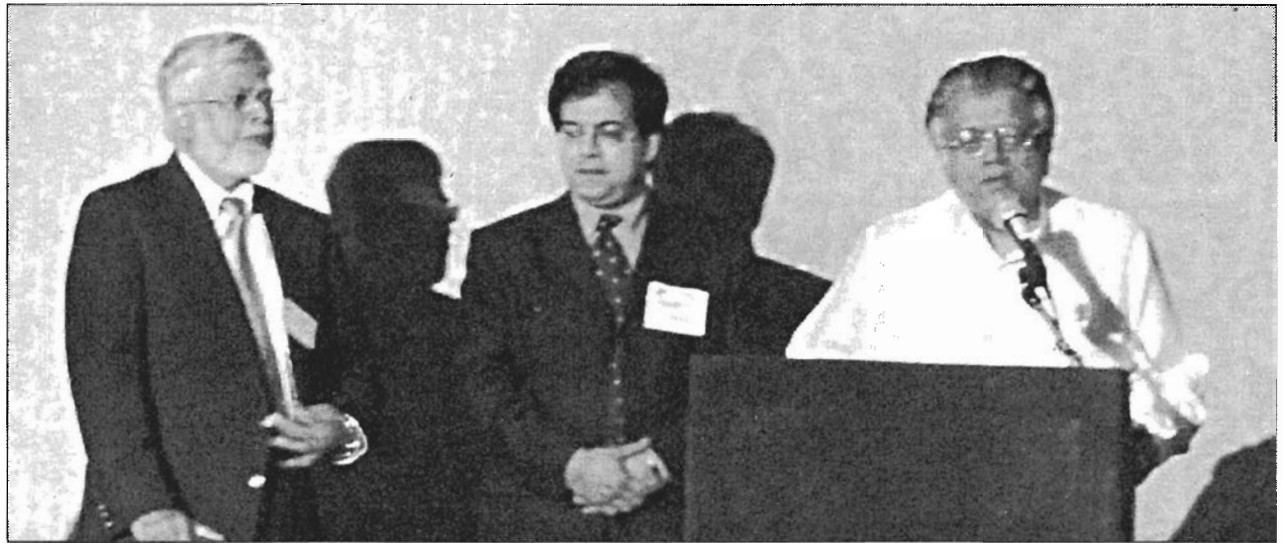
The 25-odd speakers represented a diverse array of experts and intellectuals of secular persuasion; they held groundbreaking discussions on contemporary issues and focused on the role of Muslims in India's past, present and future.

Speakers included Hindu scholar Acharya Shrikumar Poddar, Dalit leaders Dr Rahul Deepankar and Dr K P Singh; Dr Omar Khalidi, an MIT scholar who has specialized in contemporary Indian Muslim history; John Prabhudoss, Indian Christian leader; and Rajinder Singh Mago, a prominent Sikh community activist from Chicago.

Dr Shaik Ubaid, president of IMC-USA, highlighted his organization's vision of building a better India and a safer world by promoting pluralism and marginalizing ideologies such as Hindutva-fascism in Indian society and exposing the 'Hindutva infiltration of US power centers.'

He highlighted IMC-USA's strategy of working with other religious and ethnic communities as well as with secular organizations, human rights and developmental groups. He called for the formation of a 'coalition of the informed' to strengthen pluralism and secular democracy in India to guarantee its economic growth, regional stability and world peace.

"Gujarat's ethnic cleansing [a reference to the riots in 2002] was the darkest chapter of modern India's young history," he said. "India had enjoyed a unique respect in the world because of its pluralist ethos and secular democracy and its support of the struggle for the oppressed people in the world."



■ Acharya Shrikumar Poddar addresses the gathering after receiving the Bahadur Shah Zafar Award for Communal Harmony

Because of the Gujarat violence, he argued, India's stature was greatly reduced in the eyes of the world. Because of the Hindutva forces, the future of Indian Americans as they come of age and start to claim their economic and political share in the US was being endangered.

He said he knows a vast majority of Indians, including the vast majority of Hindus, was for communal harmony and amity. He said "the darkness" has receded a little and that there seems to be light at the end of the tunnel.

"The new government has agreed to give priority to detoxifying the young minds by removing the teaching of hatred from the syllabi in Indian schools. The struggle to get justice for victims of the Gujarat genocide has gathered steam," he noted.

Lord Adam Patel of Blackburn, the keynote speaker and patron of the Council of Indian Muslims in the UK, high-

lighted the British Muslims' successful strategy towards economic and political empowerment and advised Indian Muslims living in the US to emulate it by getting involved in the struggle for social justice, economic welfare and mainstream political work.

Nishrin Husain, a human rights activist, and Lise McKean, a scholar, chaired the session on women's issues and described ways in which women can combat religious hatred. They pointed out that women are always the worst victims of pogroms and genocide.

The convention held screenings of documentary films as well as an auction of cricket bats signed by India's rising cricket star Irfan Pathan. The money from the auction will be sent to a charity of Pathan's choice. "I think we had a very fruitful meeting and discussions at the convention," Ubaid said.