

## Let Us Pave the Way for Meaningful Education: Frank Islam



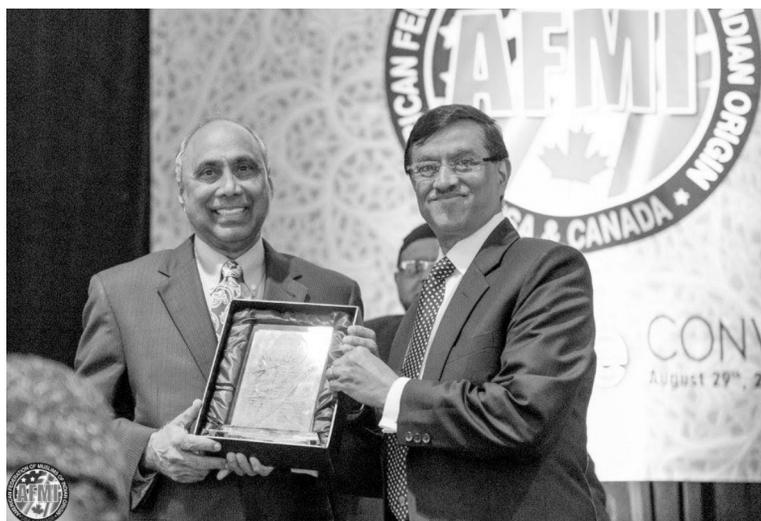
FRANK ISLAM, originally from Azamgarh, left India when he was only 15 years old to pursue his dream and now is a successful entrepreneur in America. He is popularly known as a philanthropist, civic leader and writer. Also an alumnus of AMU, Frank received his Bachelor and Master Degrees in Computer Science from the University of Colorado. He currently heads the FI Investment Group, a private investment holding company. On 29 August, he received Pride of India Award for his contribution in higher education by American Federation of Muslims of Indian Origin (AFMI) at Boston. Frank, in an interview with MOHAMMAD NAUSHAD KHAN urged the need to open schools and school doors across India until there is no Indian child who is excluded from the opportunity to get a meaningful education.

**C**ongratulations! Please share with us your feelings on having received the Pride of India Award.

I am humbled. As for my exact feelings, here is what I said when I accepted the award: Even though I recognise this award – the Pride of India – is given to one person. It is deserved by many. Indeed, as I look around this room at those of you who have supported AFMI and its initiatives, I see the richness and fullness of the Pride of India. I see fellow soldiers and comrades in the fight to make India and the world a better place for Muslims. And, I am proud to be a partner with you in this sacred mission. Therefore, it is my distinct honour and pleasure, to accept his award not for myself but on your behalf.

**When you look at the situation of education in India, what makes you happy and what troubles you the most?**

I am happy that we seem to be beginning to turn the corner in terms of providing



Frank-Islam-receiving-award

education for more youth from minority backgrounds. I am saddened that it has taken so long and we have so far to go. The 2001 Census Report showed that the literacy rate of Indian Muslims was 59.1%. The rate for Muslim males in urban areas was much higher than in rural areas. The rate for females was substantially lower in each. A study released by the U.S. India Policy Institute at the end of 2013 states that since 2006, and I quote, "...the literacy level and the quantum of improvements for Muslims were modest compared to other populations."

**How long will it take for India to compete with the western world in terms of education?**

The challenge for India in education is not to compete or to catch up with the Western World. It is to make up – make up for generations of neglect of a large segment of the population. The issue is one of access rather than quality. This is proven by the thousands of students from India and its educational system that every year goes to the best universities in the United States and excels. In contrast, there are millions of young people in India who do not get the opportunity for proper education. We need to open

schools and school doors across the country until there is no Indian child who is excluded from the opportunity to get a meaningful education.

**What kind of reform would you like to suggest in educational sector in India?**

While access for all is important, I believe there is a critical need in terms of ensuring higher educational opportunities. The study done by the U.S. Policy Institute that I referred to earlier disclosed that only 11% of Muslims in India pursue higher education compared to a national average of approximately 19% and that participation in the “general category of Muslims in higher education” had actually declined by 1.5% for the period studied. That should be totally and completely unacceptable. There needs to be a laser beam focus on creating and expanding educational opportunities at the level that brings Indian Muslim citizens into the social and economic mainstream. That level is higher education.

By higher education, I don't mean just 4-year colleges or universities. I include technical, vocational and professional education at the secondary and post-secondary levels. Education in those areas also provides avenues for participation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century careers, the competencies to compete in a global economy, and the capacity to contribute to lifting fellow Muslims out of poverty and deprivation.

**What, according to you, is the mantra to become a successful entrepreneur in India context?**

Each entrepreneur must find his or her own mantra. There is no one size fits all formula. Entrepreneurs chart their own courses and are not deterred by setbacks. They persevere. They also need the knowledge and skills to bring their dreams to fruition. I recognise and believe that firmly based upon my own educational experience here in India and in the United States.

That is why I have underwritten the building of a new school of management with an emphasis on entrepreneurship at my alma mater, Aligarh Muslim University (AMU). I have also pledged to provide considerable financial support to develop a technical training school for women so they can be empowered through higher education.

My wife Debbie and I are extremely pleased to invest in the School of Management because of the emphasis it will place on entrepreneurship and preparing the students at AMU to become entrepreneurial leaders and engage in economic development activities that will create jobs and opportunities for thousands of people throughout India. In my opinion, the return on our investment will be exponential. I want to stress that I don't look at the commitments that we are making not only as philanthropy but also as strategic

investments in building the future for Muslims in India.

**What final thoughts do you have on the subjects that we are discussing?**

Let me build on my answer to your preceding question and that is the importance for Muslim Indians from America and successful Muslim Indian business leaders to become engaged. In my speech after I received the Pride of India, I concluded my remarks by telling the audience that higher education matters for the future of Muslims in India. Higher grades of school matter. Primary grades matter. They all matter. I went on to state that what matters just as much is civic engagement from Indian American Muslims. Targeted civic engagement is the key to promoting educational and economic opportunities for Indian Muslims. I advised them that we have done well here. Now, in return, we should do well.

I would expand that those Indian Muslim entrepreneurs in India need to get engaged as well. This task is so important that we need all hands on board. Together those hands will enable us to give a hand-up to those in need. In conclusion, let me emphasise that providing assistance is not just the province of the wealthy. Each of us who has had a modicum of success can make a meaningful contribution to empowering those who are less fortunate through education. R