

ADDRESS TO THE NATION BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, HER EXCELLENCY SMT. PRATIBHA DEVISINGH PATIL ON THE EVE OF THE 63rd INDEPENDENCE DAY

New Delhi, 14th August 2009

My Fellow Citizens,

Tomorrow, we celebrate our 63rd Independence Day. On its eve, I extend my warmest greetings to all of you in India and the world over. I would like to convey a special word of gratitude to the brave personnel of the Armed Forces and the Para-military forces who guard our frontiers. I also extend my greetings to the Central and State level police as well as our internal security forces.

Our independence was won after a long and arduous struggle. Countless men and women, yearning for liberation from the colonial yoke, joined the ranks of freedom fighters. Energized by the inspiring leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and his call for an agitation based on the principles of Ahimsa and Satyagraha, they displayed undaunted courage. They willingly went through great hardships guided solely by the desire that the country be independent and its people free to determine their own destiny. This selfless spirit and sacrifices won us our freedom. I call on fellow citizens to join me in paying homage and our deepest respect to our great national leaders, martyrs, freedom fighters and all those who took part in the freedom movement and gave us a sovereign nation.

Freedom was won and the task of nation building brooked no delay. The vision, the principles and responsibilities would now onwards be for the leaders and the people of India to determine. On 15th August, 1947 itself, Bapuji was quick to remind us of this. He said, "From today you have to wear the crown of thorns. Strive ceaselessly to cultivate truth and non-violence. Be humble. Be forbearing ... Now you will be tested through and through." The same day at the stroke of midnight the vision of a free India was enunciated by the first Prime Minister of Independent India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, in his stirring "Tryst with Destiny" speech. He said we would have to, "build the noble mansion of free India where all her children dwell."

Thus, we embarked on our journey. The four essential pillars necessary to support the edifice of India have been and remain - democracy, inclusive economic development, social empowerment and a value system based on our civilizational heritage. Each one of them is individually important and must be equally strong for a stable and progressive nation.

The 15th General Elections were held this year. Spread over five phases, the effort was to reach out to every voter, even in the remotest parts of the country. That is why even where there was only one voter, arrangements were made for the casting of that one vote. The voice of every citizen is important and the principle of inclusiveness integral to democracy. In accordance with the mandate, the new Government assumed office. The electoral exercise re-affirmed the strong faith of the people, across the country, in democracy. It once again proved that the world's largest democracy is, indeed, a mature democracy. We can be proud that we have carried forward the torch of democracy in a manner that today the concept of democracy and India are inseparable.

If we can work to ensure that each citizen gets an opportunity to be heard while choosing representatives to Parliament and the Assemblies, it also becomes our bounden duty to ensure that they are heard even in the period between elections. Each elected Member of Parliament represents on an average the voice of over a 1.3 million electorate - larger than the population of some nations, and this imposes a huge responsibility to represent the aspirations of those who have elected them. They have a clear obligation to work for the welfare of the people and the progress of the nation.

At the same time, the expectations of the people are rising as they are becoming more aware of their rights and seek better opportunities. Facilities, amenities and services meant for them whether they are living in rural or urban areas can be delivered smoothly only if there is an effective governance system that is less cumbersome but more transparent and accountable. There is outrage when money meant for welfare schemes is pilfered out by corrupt practices. The flagship programmes of the Government are comprehensive ranging from health to education, employment to expanding social and economic infrastructure. Their implementation will have to be at optimal levels for an impact to be made on the lives of the people. Hence, the emphasis on reform of governance for effective delivery of public services is critical to change the lives of the people. The administrators must be responsive to the needs of the people. Their work is a public service - commitment, dedication and honesty should be the hallmarks of their work.

This year the monsoon has been less than normal impacting agriculture and availability of water. We have to be prepared to face the situation. The Government is taking all possible steps to deal with it. It is also taking necessary measures to handle the H1N1 influenza. Citizens have to come forward to contribute to Government's efforts in these areas and in other development initiatives through public-private partnerships, NGOs, community groups or Self Help Groups. An enlightened citizenry conscious of its civic duties and social responsibilities, maintaining discipline, following good habits particularly about hygiene and cleanliness, respectful towards nature's bounty and sensitive to environmental concerns is the greatest asset of a nation.

Fellow Citizens,

Our uninterrupted democratic credentials and our steady economic progress achieved due to our hard work have fortified India's stature. Even in the face of a global slowdown, which demands that we manage the economy to counter its effects, we must work to continue our upward trajectory. We have a large domestic market and inherent strengths to drive the economy forward. As we focus on areas of proven strength, on building of infrastructure throughout the country and rural development, it should be our incessant endeavor to expand into new areas of growth.

We must prepare for the future world whose contours will be shaped by innovation, technology and a spirit of enterprise. India has been playing a leading role in the knowledge economy and in the IT and IT enabled sectors. We are well placed to face the future with confidence, but we must not be complacent. Transformational changes have taken place in India when technology has been used for development. The building of modern India requires a focus on strengthening our academic institutions and research facilities. Our efforts in this direction should be motivated by the desire to achieve excellence. India can set high standards of Research and Development so that

these can become the international benchmarks in a knowledge society. The world expects India to be one of the largest economies of the world. We know we can achieve this position. After all, history tells us that since ancient times India was a wealthy nation well known for its riches and its global importance. However, India which is a civilization in continuum seeks in addition to material progress, enrichment of human life through cultural advancement, a constant search for knowledge and understanding, and above all, social justice.

Our narrative of growth should be a story of opportunity and a life of dignity for all. Social empowerment requires considerable amount of work and, hence, must occupy centre stage in our national consciousness. There are the weaker and the vulnerable sections of society who are not full partners in the growth and development process and remain on the sidelines. These sections of society need to be drawn into the national mainstream. They need to be given access to education, health and skill-building - the tools of empowerment. This will equip them with abilities and capabilities and generate confidence about their future prospects. This will give them a sense of control over their destinies. It is within the realm of possibility to achieve this. Signs of change are becoming visible. Today, there are girls joining colleges, whose parents had never ever been to school. This is a development that has happened within a generation. People are today realizing the advantages of being educated and are ready to seize opportunities. The passage of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Bill is a landmark legislation for achieving our goal of universal education. The National Mission on Empowerment of Women will socially and economically empower women - 50 percent of our population to play an active role in nation building. Giving an equal chance to everybody to get ahead in life is an article of faith for the Republic of India, and building an inclusive society our objective.

I am confident that our nation will move forward to become an exemplary democracy, an economic power and a progressive society. However, what will be the value system upon which we will judge our performance? There will be sweeping changes in the world. What will be our anchor to cope with these changes? In such situations, if we are not rooted in values we become rudderless. Hence, the importance of values in the nation building endeavour. We, as a nation, are fortunate that we are the inheritors of values which have stood the test of time. Harmony and peaceful co-existence have been at the core of our civilization. They are messages relevant for all times and ages. They can, perhaps, never be outdated. Therefore, even as we progress it will be these values which would help to provide us strength as they have done throughout our history. India should build its destiny on a culture of peace and harmony. There should be harmony between good traditions and progress.

India has shown a remarkable capacity to assimilate change as well as the influences that have been brought to its land over centuries by the many groups who came here. This has made us a composite society consisting of many different strands but yet united. This unity has been brought about by the philosophy of harmony which demands a sense of responsibility towards fellow human beings. It seeks to resolve differences rather than widen them. It seeks to bring people together rather than divide them. It looks at change not as a threat but as a reality of the march of time. Peaceful co-existence is inherent in our culture. Terrorism, which targets innocent people, is the very anti-thesis of peaceful co-existence. It is condemnable because it is against the tenets of every religion and faith. It must be defeated in the interest of the collective goal of

humankind to build peaceful societies and a peaceful world. We need to work together towards this end as humankind shares a common destiny.

Fellow citizens,

We have struggled since the first war of independence in 1857. We have fought against the sentiments largely created by a divide and rule policy, which aimed at defeating our unity. We won because our freedom struggle was based on noble principles. We have adhered to secularism, equality and respect for all religions. I call upon my brothers and sisters of every religion - whether they be Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, Parsees and all others, to live together in harmony. Here, I am reminded of the famous lines:-

मज़हब नहीं सिखाता,
आपस में बैर रखना।

If we have to progress, communal harmony is important. It is like the thread which holds together a garland of beautiful flowers made of different colours and fragrance. Let us prove that we can be united as human beings and not divided. Let us fight against violence and extremism and be an important part of promoting peace and harmony. If we choose to be bound by the feelings of hatred, mistrust and apathy we will never move forward. Therefore, let us build a strong, united and progressive India for us and our future generations as also a peaceful world. I end with the message contained in these lines:-

Common be our resolve,

Our hearts be united,

Our thoughts be in unison,

So that all may live harmoniously.

Once again, my greetings to all Fellow Citizens on the occasion of Independence Day.

Jai Hind.
