

Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) – 2009

Chennai, 7-9 January, 2009

Inaugural Speech by Hon'ble Prime Minister of India

“I am delighted to be here in the presence of such a distinguished gathering of overseas Indians. I wish you and your families a very happy, peaceful, prosperous and purposeful new year. While you are in our country, I wish you all a very pleasant stay in our country.

We have congregated in the southern most state of India and in a city where traditions and culture blend with modernity and technology with great ease. I am sure many of you will be visiting the great temples at Mahabalipuram. They stand testimony to our sea-faring history. The ancient Tamil people, the ancient Telugu people, the people of Bengal and Orissa, have all sailed through the sea to our East, not to conquer lands but to conquer the hearts and minds of the people they came in contact with.

This Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas is our contemporary tribute to that great spirit, to that great heritage and to the excellent work you all continue to do as people of Indian origin in your respective countries. It is a tribute to your spirit of adventure and enterprise which have transformed you and the Indian Overseas community into powerful agents of social and economic change and the world admiration in distinct lands.

You come to this Conference from distant lands from all around the world. Our Chief Guest today, His Excellency Mr. Ramdien Sardjoe, the Vice President of Suriname, comes from the other side of our planet. Yet, he has inside him the blood of his Indian ancestors. His leadership and contribution to public life are a testimony to the achievements of the sons and daughters of India who have travelled to distant lands, and excelled in their respective professions. We take great pride in their achievements.

I welcome you, Mr. Vice President, to this ancient land of Bharat. I am sure your heart beats faster on this soil. Let me assure you, our hearts too beat for you and for the millions of Pravasis, every moment of our lives.

We feel proud of the great achievements of the people of Indian origin around the world. More than any other people, the people of India and of Indian origin know the meaning of tolerance and the art of living together regardless of caste, creed, religion or language.

Pluralism and the willingness to live with each other despite our differences is a deeply embedded trait of Indian culture. That is why I have often said that those who pursue the politics of exclusion, of monotheism, who divide people between “us” and “them”, betray the very idea of India. Our civilization was built on reason; on the willingness to engage in dialogue. As my friend Prof. Amartya Sen has reminded us, we Indian people have been over the centuries, an argumentative people. But I also say that we have been a consensual civilization.

The recent terrorist attacks in Mumbai were a grim reminder of the grave threat posed by extremism and terrorism to our pluralistic and liberal traditions. There are some who would not like to see India succeed. But we have shown, over and over again, that we will not allow the forces of terrorism and extremism to destabilize our polity, our economy and our society. We have taken several measures to strengthen national security, to promote national cohesion and we will continue to work with the international community to ensure that there are no safe havens and launching pads for terrorists.

Despite the global economic downturn, the fundamentals of Indian economy continue to remain strong. We expect to achieve a growth rate of about 7% this year, which will be among the highest in the world. Much of India’s growth is internally driven and I expect we can maintain a strong pace of growth in the coming years. That certainly will be our ambition.

India is actively involved in the meetings of the global G-20 countries, which are deliberating on the creation of a new global financial structure. We need to ensure that any new architecture that emerges is suited to the new challenges and vulnerabilities facing the world economy and simultaneously it must be reflective of the changes that have taken place in the economic structure over the years. Countries like India have a right to be given their due place in the evolving scheme of things.

A few months ago the international community lifted restrictions to end our nuclear isolation of the last thirty four years. The overseas Indian community, specially in the United States, played a key role in ensuring this outcome and in mobilizing congressional support for it in the United States. For this we are truly grateful to all of you. But much more importantly, this is a sign of the growing role that Indian origin communities are now playing in public policy and opinion making across the world. We applaud you for that contribution.

I am sure that each one of you would have sensed the growing respect with which India is today regarded in the world. India’s rise is increasingly being regarded as an important dimension of the emerging international world order. Our counsels on key global challenges are not just being heard, but are being actively sought and in this enterprise of changing the image of India, the overseas Indian community have played a magnificent role and I thank you for that.

The Overseas Indian Citizenship Scheme which we had announced in 2006 has elicited an overwhelming response. I am therefore happy to announce that henceforth OCI card holders who are qualified professionals – doctors, dentists, pharmacists, engineers, architects and chartered accountants - will have the benefit of practicing their professions here in our country. Further details to operationalize this benefit are being worked out.

I am happy to launch today a new initiative called ‘The Global Indian Knowledge Network’. This Network will connect people of Indian origin from a variety of disciplines to users at the national, state and local levels in India. My hope is that the Network will facilitate transfer of knowledge and serve as a ‘virtual think tank’ to generate new ideas on issues such as development, education and health-care.

I would like to say a few words about the five million Indian workers working in the Gulf. I have seen their contributions first-hand when I recently visited Oman and Qatar. I was amazed to see their grit, their determination, and how they are contributing magnificently to processes of wealth creation in these countries.

We are therefore concerned at the rise in tensions in the region as a result of the attack in Gaza that has led to the needless loss of lives of many innocent men, women and children. India has strongly condemned these incidents and it is our hope that the international community would get together and help restore peace in the region as soon as possible. I wish to reiterate our unstinted and unwavering support for the just Palestinian cause.

We have put in place several measures for better protection and welfare of our workers overseas, including by entering into inter-governmental agreements.

I am happy to inform you that we have launched a comprehensive e-governance project on migration. Under this project, every worker will be issued a ‘Smart Card’ that will contain all details of the worker, his work contract, his employer, his insurance etc. This data will also be available to the Government of India as well as our missions overseas. The objective of this project is to transform emigration process into a simple, transparent, orderly and humane process.

Till now, at these gatherings, we have celebrated the spirit of adventure and enterprise of the global Indians. This year, let me add, that we have made contact with a distant pravasi that you have all grown up hearing about – Chanda-mama!

When Chandrayaan-I soared into the skies last October, it was not just a display of India’s technological achievements. It was the fulfillment of an ancient dream, to meet Chandamama! I assure you, ladies and gentlemen, that one day an Indian, desi or pravasi, will complete that journey and we will be able to land a man on the moon from India.

It is this sense of confidence in our future that defines the India of today. I urge you all to come and participate in this great adventure of human development within the framework of a free and open society and an open economy. I have often said no where else a billion people are trying to seek their economic and social salvation in the framework of a functioning democracy committed to respect for all fundamental human rights, commitment to the rule of law and if India succeeds it will have profound implication for the development of the rest of the country of the third world. India welcomes your participation in our social and economic development. Modern science and technology have created many new frontiers of knowledge to be harnessed for human development and well being. I hope your conference gives us more ideas on how we can work together for India's progress and your welfare. With these words, I once again welcome you all to this magnificent Conference."
