

## **SPEECH OF SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE, FORMER PRESIDENT OF INDIA ON THE INAUGURATION OF TIMES LITERATURE FESTIVAL, 2018**

I am happy to be amidst you all to inaugurate the Times Literature Festival, Delhi – 2018, especially since literature has always been close to my heart.

2. At the outset, I would like to say that I wonder if I deserve to be inaugurating this prestigious Literary Festival. I am neither creative nor a writer. I have penned a few books but those are the expressions of my experience during my long public life. I am not an imaginative writer or a poet. However, I will not be immodest on my part to claim that I am a reader.

Dear Friends,

3. Literature is the lifeblood of any society, mirroring its triumphs and challenges, its anxieties and its possibilities. And India has always been blessed with a strong literary lineage of writers, poets, intellectuals and thinkers who have chronicled the times, enriched the intellectual traditions and earned India the well deserved title of **Vishwaguru**. Swami Vivekananda has rightly said, ***“Every idea that you have in the mind has a counterpart in a word; the word and the thought are inseparable. The external part of one and the***

***same thing is what we call word, and the internal part is what we call thought. No man can, by analysis, separate thought from word.***" It is the thoughts of the authors who represented and mirrored their contemporary ethos which have translated into the great body of literary treasure we get to read today.

4. The earliest Indian literature took the form of the canonical Hindu sacred writings, known as the *Veda*, which were written in Sanskrit. To the Veda were added prose commentaries such as the *Brahmanas* and the *Upanishads*. The production of Sanskrit literature extended from about 1500 BCE to about 1000 BCE and reached its pinnacle during the 1st to 7th centuries BCE. In addition to sacred and philosophical writings, such genres as devotional lyrics, court poetry, plays, and narrative folktales emerged.

5. Classical Sanskrit was identified with the spiritual and ritualistic religion of the Vedas. Buddhism and Jainism evolved other literary languages namely Pali and Ardhamagadhi, respectively. From these and other related languages emerged the modern languages of northern India. The literature of those languages depended largely on the ancient Indian background, which includes two epic poems

in Sanskrit, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, as well as the *Bhagavata-purana* and the other Puranas.

6. In addition, the Sanskrit philosophies were the source of philosophical writing in the later literatures, and the Sanskrit schools of rhetoric were of great importance for the development of court poetry in many of the modern literatures. The South Indian language of Tamil is an exception to this pattern of Sanskrit influence because it had a classical tradition of its own. Urdu and Sindhi are the other exceptions, with a mixed influence of Sanskrit, Parsi & Arabic.

7. Beginning in the 19th century, particularly during the height of British control over the subcontinent, Western literary models had an impact on Indian literature, the most striking result being the introduction of the use of vernacular prose on a major scale. The forms such as the novel and short story began to be adopted by Indian writers, as did realism and an interest in social questions and psychological description. A tradition of literature in English was also established in the subcontinent.

Dear Friends, Ladies & Gentlemen,

8. India is an ancient civilization but a young, restless nation, impatient for change. The challenge for us will be to embrace increasing, rapidly escalating technological disruption without losing touch with our long established cultural values and ethos. I am told that Times Lit Fest Delhi, now in its fourth edition, has been addressing contemporary concerns, giving Delhi a unique Literary Festival of ideas. Festivals like these have been at the forefront in revitalizing interest of the young technologically driven generation towards the fine world of literature.

9. I am pleased to know that the Times Literary Festival is a people's festival, open to the public and completely free of cost. This is highly commendable and I congratulate the organizers of the Delhi Lit Fest. I am also told that the theme, **'Beyond Covers,'** aims to capture the wide range of literary and artistic endeavours that the festival highlights, from social media to scholarship, from high art to street expressions, from budding novelists, and films to the man on the street.

Dear Friends,

10. Today, I want to re-emphasize something said in early nineteenth century by Edward Bulwer-Lytton and still holds true. I quote, "***The Pen is mightier than the Sword.***" (Unquote) I would like to take this moment to urge all of you to use the power of your words now especially in the increasingly fractured, fragmented times we live in. We spend a lot of time and effort talking AT each other, instead of talking TO each other.

11. In this age of the Technological Revolution, everyone has a platform to give a piece of their minds with the safety of anonymity behind their screens. It gives everyone a free pass without any accountability, festering hatred, generating fake news and creating panic. The casualties are usually decency, decorum and facts. We must strike conversations. The beauty of debate and dissent is that we can disagree, without being disagreeable. We can be ideologically opposed, and be friends; we can be raucous, and be respectful.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

12. I take from your participation here that you are here to listen, to learn, to grow. As the well-read individuals you all are, it is now your responsibility, to replicate this at your level, and generate a culture of discussion and debate.

Instead of deepening divides, we can try to seek common ground. Instead of constructing walls, we can try to build bridges. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru so vividly expressed in the 'Discovery of India', and I quote, "***I am convinced that Nationalism can only come out of the ideological fusion of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and other groups in India. That does not mean that extinction of any real culture of any group, but it does mean a common national outlook, to which other matters are subordinated***". (Unquote). There can be many conflicting visions of the idea of India, but I believe we can all agree that India is a truly beautiful idea that very naturally encompasses all its conflicting visions.

Friends,

13. India in all its diverse hues and yet a cohesive rainbow fascinates me. It enthralls me. A nation of 1.3 billion people who use more than 122 languages and 1600 dialects in their everyday lives, practice 7 major religions, belong to 3 major ethnic groups – Caucasians, Mongoloids, and Dravidians and yet living under one system, one flag and one identity. The identity of being an Indian – a ***Bharatiya***. We are to remember that we are all Indians, and we all in our own way, want the best for this wonderful land. That, ladies & gentlemen, could be a good starting point.

14. I hope the writers and thinkers gathered here will discuss how we, as a society and nation, can tackle this challenge. I am sure the next two days will provide all the participants and audience members many exciting new ideas and insightful perspectives. I congratulate the Times Group once again and wish the festival much success this time and in all the years to come.

Thank you.

Jai Hind