

**SPEECH DELIVERED BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE ON THE OCCASION OF THE 6<sup>TH</sup> K.S. RAJAMONY MEMORIAL LECTURE**

**KOCHI, KERALA: MARCH 2, 2017**

1. I am happy to be in Kerala to deliver the 6<sup>th</sup> Memorial Lecture in honour of eminent lawyer and former Member of the Kerala Public Men Inquiry Commission, Shri K.S. Rajamony.
2. I have visited Kerala many times in different capacities during my public life. It has been the gateway to India for traders and religious missionaries from different parts of the globe. The people of Kerala are known for their progressive thinking. The State's impressive achievements in the field of literacy, education, health, gender equality, tourism and culture have brought it global acclaim.
3. The Kerala High Court, its Judges as well as lawyers enjoy high reputation across the country. Luminaries like Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer made very valuable contributions in delivery of justice to the poor and underprivileged.
4. The topic of today's lecture is India @ 70. This August 15, India will complete seventy years since we became independent. For 50 years before Independence, the economic growth rate of India was 0% to 1%. In the fifties, our growth rate rose to 1 – 2%, the sixties 3 – 4% and in the 90s, with economic reforms, to 6 to 7%. In the last decade, our growth rate has averaged around 8%, making us the fastest growing large economy of the world.
5. India's population in 1950 was 360 million. Today, we are a 1.3 billion strong nation. Our annual per capita income has gone up from Rs. 7,500 at the time of independence to over Rs. 77,000. GDP growth rate has risen from 2.3 percent to 7.9 percent in 2015-16. Poverty ratio has declined from over 60 percent to less than 25 percent. Average life expectancy has gone up from 31.4 to 68.4 years. Literacy rate has gone up from 18 to 74 percent. Food grains

production has gone up from 45 million to an estimated 272 million tonnes in 2016-17.

6. India led a ship to mouth existence in the early days of independence. We had to survive on import of food grains from abroad. Today, we not only produce enough food grains to feed ourselves but are also exporting the same.
7. In 1947, we had no industry worth its name. In contrast, today we are the 10<sup>th</sup> largest industrialized nation in the world. Our technological base as well as network of research laboratories and higher education institutions are looked upon by the world with admiration. India's space, IT, bio-tech and pharma industries are of a global standard. Only two weeks back, ISRO set a world record launching 104 satellites into space at one go, a feat no other country has achieved. We not only reached the Mars in our very first attempt but also achieved it at a cost far lower than anyone else in the world.
8. In the last 70 years, tangible change can be seen in every aspect of our lives. India has transformed itself from a poor under-developed nation into the third largest economy in the world in PPP terms within a short span of seven decades.
9. Equally important is our success in consolidating the unity of our nation and our democracy in the midst of extraordinary challenges and tremendous diversity. We have firmly established within our country the rule of law, an independent judiciary and vibrant media as well as civil society. We have also created strong institutions like the Election Commission and the CAG who stand as pillars of our political system. Every known religion in the world, over hundred different languages used in everyday life, 1600 dialects and multiple cultures are united under one flag and one Constitution. Around 553 million people voted in the 2014 General Elections, an exercise matched in scale and scope by none else in the world.

Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

10. The most important legacy bequeathed to us by our founding fathers is our Constitution.
11. A Constitution is a charter for the governance of a nation. The notion of what is good governance must be defined by the need of the times and enriched by the experience of the decades. Yet, the Constitution enshrines certain timeless values that should never be compromised. It is against the touchstone of these values that we must constantly measure our performance.
12. The Preamble records the resolve of the people of India to secure to all citizens justice - social, economic and political as well as liberty, equality and fraternity. It also establishes the principle of secularism.
13. Justice - social, economic and political - is in the life of any nation a journey more than a destination. To achieve social justice requires not mere governance but a recasting of mindsets and the transformation of social ethos. That is the job not just of the legislature, the executive or the courts, but of each one of us.
14. The ultimate goal of any democracy is the empowerment of the individual, irrespective of his economic, religious or social standing. This may appear to be a utopian dream for many, but the strength of a system lies in its capacity to ceaselessly work for its accomplishment. The goal of political justice requires the continuous empowerment of marginalised sections of our society. We owe ourselves to create a system in which access to politics is not limited to a privileged few but an average Indian also feels empowered enough to contribute.
15. Economic development is vital to good governance. We cannot distribute wealth which we do not possess. Therefore, production of wealth must necessarily be one of the predominant objectives of state policy. However, this must be imbued with the principle of equality on which there can be no compromise.

16. An egalitarian society can only be created when growth is inclusive. It is important to ensure that there is justice and equality of opportunity and the state does not create conditions in which the privileged few gain at the cost of the multitudes who suffer endemic poverty. A sustainable society can only be based on the principles of equity and justice. The Indian Constitution has been rightly described as a Magna Carta of socio economic transformation.
17. When India became independent, many in the world thought our democratic experiment would never succeed. They looked at our diversity, poverty as well as the lack of education of our people and predicted that India would lapse into authoritarian rule or military dictatorship. But, the people of India proved these prophets of doomsday wrong.
18. Yet, we must be conscious of the fact that our democracy requires constant nurturing. At no cost should we allow the exploitation of the fault lines. Those who spread violence must remember that Buddha, Ashoka and Akbar are remembered as heroes in history; not Hitler or Genghis Khan.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

19. I do not consider a society or State to be civilised if its citizens' behaviour towards women is uncivilised. When we brutalize a woman, we wound the soul of our civilisation. Not only does our Constitution guarantee equal rights to women but our culture and tradition also celebrate the feminine as divine. Protection and safety of our women and children must be a nationwide priority. The acid test of any society is its attitude towards women and children. India should not fail this test.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

20. There should be no room in India for the intolerant Indian. India has been since ancient times a bastion of free thought, speech and expression. Our society has always been characterized by the open contestation of diverse schools of thought and debate as well as discussion. Freedom of

speech and expression is one of the most important fundamental rights guaranteed by our Constitution. There must be space for legitimate criticism and dissent.

Friends,

21. India was a world leader in the field of education when our Universities like Nalanda and Takshshila were at the height of their glory. Nalanda and Takshshila are not mere geographical expressions but representations of the idea for free thought which flourished in these great Universities of the past. Our premier institutions of higher education are the vehicles on which India has to propel itself into a knowledge society. These temples of learning must resound with creativity and free thinking. Those in Universities must engage in reasoned discussion and debate rather than propagate a culture of unrest. It is tragic to see them caught in the vortex of violence and disquiet.

Ladies and gentlemen,

22. Our first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru believed that democracy was something deeper than voting, elections or a political form of government. He said "*In the ultimate analysis, it is a manner of thinking, a manner of action, a manner of behaviour to your neighbour and to your adversary and opponent.*"<sup>1</sup>
23. Our leaders and political activists must listen to the people, engage with them, learn from them and respond to their needs and concerns. Our law makers must never take the people for granted. They must focus on the fundamental task of law making and raising of issues of concern to the people as well as finding solutions to their problems.
24. Legislation is the first and foremost responsibility of a Parliamentarian. It is most unfortunate that time devoted towards legislation has been gradually declining in our Parliament. To illustrate, the first Lok Sabha from 1952-57

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<sup>1</sup>Speech at a Symposium on the Prospects of Democracy in Asian Countries in Delhi on 12 December, 1958.

had 677 sittings in which 319 bills were passed. In comparison, the fourteenth Lok Sabha from 2004-2009 had 332 sittings and passed just 247 bills. The fifteenth Lok Sabha had 357 sittings and passed 181 bills while the sixteenth Lok Sabha has had 197 sittings and passed only 111 bills (upto the 10<sup>th</sup> session).

25. Figures are available for the time lost due to interruptions/adjournments from the Tenth Lok Sabha (1991-96) onwards. 9.95% of total time was lost due to interruptions in the Tenth Lok Sabha, 5.28% in the Eleventh Lok Sabha, 11.93% in the Twelfth Lok Sabha, 18.95% in the Thirteenth Lok Sabha, 19.58% in the Fourteenth Lok Sabha, a shocking 41.6% in the Fifteenth Lok Sabha and about 16% in the Sixteenth Lok Sabha (upto the 10<sup>th</sup> session).

Ladies and Gentlemen:

26. No one who holds any elected office has been invited by the voters to occupy that office. Each one has gone to the voters and pleaded for their votes and support. The trust placed by the people in the political system and those elected should not be betrayed.
27. Our Legislatures and Parliament must not turn into arenas for combat. Floor tests are not meant to be muscle tests. The opportunity to represent the people is not a right or entitlement but a moral obligation and duty. Our elected representatives owe it to the people of our country to act as models of exemplary conduct.

Friends,

28. The Parliament of India and our Legislative Assemblies are central pillars on which the edifice of our democracy rests. They are the supreme institutions comprising of members directly elected by our people. It is through them that governments are held accountable by the people. If they become dysfunctional, it results in not just paralysis of those institutions but creates an adverse impact across the system. The debate and discussions which ought to take place in the open in the House of Parliament and Assemblies cannot be replicated elsewhere. When they

cease to function effectively, issues spill out onto the streets. The very basis of our democracy gets undermined.

29. Let me read certain extracts from the well known speech made to a Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949 by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. He said and I quote:

*“.....however good a Constitution may be, it is sure to turn out bad because those who are called to work it, happen to be a bad lot. However bad a Constitution may be, it may turn out to be good if those who are called to work it, happen to be a good lot. The working of a Constitution does not depend wholly upon the nature of the Constitution. The Constitution can provide only the organs of State such as the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary. The factors on which the working of those organs of the State depend are the people and the political parties they will set up as their instruments to carry out their wishes and their politics.”*

*“Will Indians place the country above their creed or will they place creed above country? I do not know. But this much is certain that if the parties place creed above country, our independence will be put in jeopardy a second time and probably be lost forever. This eventuality we must all resolutely guard against.”*

*“.....If we wish to maintain democracy not merely in form, but also in fact, what must we do? The first thing in my judgement we must do is to hold fast to constitutional methods of achieving our social and economic objectives. It means we must abandon the bloody methods of revolution. ....But where constitutional methods are open, there can be no justification for these unconstitutional methods. These methods are nothing but the Grammar of Anarchy and the sooner they are abandoned, the better for us.” (Unquote)*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

30. I recall a famous story of Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of the United States. Walking out after conclusion of deliberations of the Constitution Convention of 1787, a lady, Ms. Pomel of Philadelphia asked him *“Doctor, what have we got, a Republic or Monarchy?”* With no hesitation whatsoever, Benjamin Franklin responded *“A Republic, if you can keep it.”*

31. The time has come for collective efforts to re-discover the sense of national purpose and patriotism that alone can lift our nation on to the road of sustained progress and prosperity. The nation and the people must always come first. Let us strive to arrest the moral decline in our society and ensure that our core civilisational values find firm root. Let us exert ourselves to strengthen India's pluralism and diversity. Let us be uncompromising in rooting out violence, prejudice and hatred.
32. Let us strive for rapid progress but even as we do so, ensure that the benefits of economic progress percolate down to the poorest of the poor and those living in the furthest corners of our country. Let us make the poorest in our land part of the story of a rising India. Let us embrace education, skill development and innovation which will enable us catapult India into the future and build a knowledge economy, riding the technological wave of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
33. I see a very bright future for India. Our Constitutional values, young population and entrepreneurial abilities as well as capacity for hard work provide us the fundamentals required for rapid progress as well as the building of a caring and compassionate society. India has changed dramatically in the last 70 years. I am confident that in the next ten years, we will see even greater progress as we steer our nation, focused on further strengthening our open, democratic and inclusive society.

Thank you,

Jai Hind!

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