

ADDRESS TO PARLIAMENT—20 FEBRUARY 1978

| | | |
|-------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| Lok Sabha | — | Sixth Lok Sabha |
| Session | — | First Session of the year |
| President of India | — | Dr. N. Sanjiva Reddy |
| Vice-President of India | — | Shri B. D. Jatti |
| Prime Minister of India | — | Shri Morarji Desai |
| Speaker, Lok Sabha | — | Shri K. S. Hegde |

HONOURABLE MEMBERS,

I welcome you to this first session of Parliament in the current year which is also the first that I am addressing since I assumed the Office of President of India. While there are many things that claim our attention on this day, my thoughts go out to the people who lost their lives and property and to their kith and kin who survived, the devastating cyclones which struck Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Pondicherry* and Lakshadweep. My Government has treated this as a national calamity and has rendered all possible assistance and has fully cooperated with the concerned State Governments in organising relief measures. People from every part of our country have spontaneously and generously made contributions and I should like to place on record my sincere appreciation of their help.

In the eleven months that have elapsed since the general election, Parliament and Government have gone ahead with speed in restoring to the people the freedoms and protections guaranteed by the Constitution in their original plenitude. The Courts have regained their powers. The Press is free. The citizen is no longer in fear of arbitrary restrictions on his freedom. Step by step, the promise of re-establishing a just balance between and among the legislature, the executive, the judiciary and the citizen is being fulfilled. In fact the process is nearly complete except for the constitutional amendments that have to be made.

One of the first tasks to which the Government addressed itself in terms of its mandate was the removal of the authoritarian provisions that had been introduced into the Constitution. The Constitution (Forty-fourth Amendment) Bill, which has been passed by both the Houses of Parliament, is now before the State Legislatures for ratification and does away with the

* Now known as Puducherry.

various restrictions on the jurisdiction of courts. After detailed discussions with leaders of the Opposition Parties, a comprehensive Bill to abolish the distortions introduced by the Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act, has been drafted and will be introduced during the course of this session. I hope it will receive the full and early cooperation of all sections of the two Houses so that the Constitution can be restored to its true form by removing the dark spots. In particular, there is need to build bulwarks against any possible future bid to use the Constitution itself to negate and subvert the basic principles of democracy.

Several changes that had been introduced in the electoral laws vitiating the equality before law, altering the concept of corrupt practices and abridging the power to appeal to the courts have been repealed. Another Bill is before you to repeal the amendments made in the Representation of Peoples Act in 1974 and in 1975 so as to restore the democratic elements which obtained prior to these amendments. While undemocratic intrusions are thus being removed, there is need for basic reforms in electoral laws and procedures in order to make the electoral process more equitable and less susceptible to pernicious influences. Government is studying this question in detail and will place its proposals before the political parties very soon.

The people earnestly yearn for cleaner politics and cleaner administration at all levels. Unless there is faith in the probity of the holders of high office, the future of constitutional Government will not be secure. The Commissions constituted to enquire into the excesses of the Emergency and the allegations against certain individuals who had misused their positions are engaged in their onerous tasks. The Lokpal Bill designed to provide for practical and reliable safeguards against corruption and misuse of power by the elected representatives of the people is before you. Government will also be introducing a Bill to provide that all Members of Parliament should declare their assets, liabilities and business interests.

An alert public opinion is the best guarantor of rule of law and of honest and efficient democratic Government. By repealing the Prevention of Publication of Objectionable Matter Act and reviving the Parliament Proceedings (Protection of Publication) Act, Parliament has enabled the Press to function once more as a watchdog of liberty of the individual and well-being of the community. Government has taken the initiative to end any kind of control over news agencies. Assessment of the performance of the Press should be left to professional organisations, like the Press Council, which I hope will soon be revived. In order further to facilitate the growth of sturdy and independent newspapers and news services in the country, Government proposes to appoint a Press Commission to make suitable recommendations.

The facilities given to all political parties to broadcast over the radio and the television during the elections to State Assemblies in June, 1977

opened a new chapter in the annals of our media. Government has made it very clear not to use the official media for partisan purposes and is awaiting the report of the Working Group which is studying the question of giving greater autonomy to Akashvani and Doordarshan.

A thorough review of the Maintenance of Internal Security Act has been made by Government and a Bill has already been introduced for the repeal of MISA and for amending the Code of Criminal Procedure. Government has seen to it that while retaining the minimum necessary legal sanctions in the interest of security and defence of India, maintenance of public order and all services and supplies essential to the life of the community, necessary safeguards, including review by boards of judges nominated by the Chief Justices of High Courts, are provided to prevent any kind of arbitrariness in the exercise of such powers.

In some areas of national life, the suppressed feelings of the people have found expression in various forms of protests and agitations. At the same time, the removal of restrictions has been utilised by some sections to indulge in acts of violence, intimidation and sabotage. There have also been acts and threats of terrorism against our personnel and property abroad. While any aggrieved section is welcome to seek redress of its legitimate grievances through constitutional channels open to it, the Government cannot obviously permit lawlessness and violence. Stringent deterrent action will be taken against those indulging in them. The police in the country has to be transformed into an effective instrument of public service not only to maintain law and order but also to protect the rights of citizens, especially the weaker sections. Government has issued detailed directions to the Administration in this regard. Since the Indian Police Act was enacted in 1861 and the last Police Commission was set up as far back as in 1902, the Government has appointed a National Police Commission to examine and recommend on all the major issues pertaining to police administration in the country.

The Government attaches highest importance to the enforcement of the rights and safeguards for Minorities/Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and Backward Classes. The Government feels that standing institutional arrangements are necessary to enable these sections to participate effectively and freely as equal members in the national mainstream. The following Commissions are, therefore, being set up:

- (1) The Minorities Commission is being set up for the enforcement of constitutional safeguards and the protection of laws passed by the Union and the State Governments; and
- (2) The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Commission is being set up to investigate all matters pertaining to the safeguards for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution and laws.

A Backward Classes Commission is being set up to go into the problems of the backward classes and make recommendations to improve their conditions.

Due to proper management of the economy in the past year, it is today well placed for making a rapid advance in the coming year. The rate of growth of the economy has risen to 5 per cent this year as against less than 2 per cent in the year prior to the assumption of office by this Government. Agricultural production has made up the ground lost last year and foodgrain production is expected to be above 118 million tonnes. The production of commercial crops also is much larger during the current year. The balance of payments continues to be strong in spite of a deceleration of export earnings and our foreign exchange reserves have continued to rise significantly. Procurement has been large in spite of the removal of the zonal system and food stocks are currently about 17 million tonnes even though the off-take from the public distribution system is larger.

Inflationary pressures have been brought under check. While the price rise in the previous year was about 12 per cent, the current level of prices is no higher than the level at the end of March, 1977. The growth of money supply which had been as high as 20 per cent has been brought down substantially in the current year. However, since the inflationary potential in the economy is considerable Government does not view the price situation with complacency. All available instruments will be deployed to maintain reasonable price stability during the next year.

This Government inherited an economy in which poverty and unemployment were acute, particularly in the rural areas, and in which the development of the past 30 years had not benefited large numbers. To rectify this neglect of the rural areas as well as to solve the chronic problems of poverty and unemployment Government decided to re-orient the strategy of development. Therefore, the Fifth Five Year Plan is being terminated this year and a new Five Year Plan is being started from April 1978, which will incorporate fully the new thinking of the Government regarding the strategy of development. The primary objectives would be the removal of unemployment and substantial underemployment in the shortest possible time, increasing the availability of basic goods and services to the people in the lowest income groups in the same period, a significant reduction in disparities of income and wealth and a steady progress towards technical self-reliance. The next Five Year Plan will therefore, give particular emphasis to agriculture and allied activities, cottage and small scale industries, irrigation and power, adult education, universalisation of elementary education, rural water supply and rural roads. The production of basic goods necessary for the economy, such as oil, coal, metals, fertilizers, cement will also be emphasised.

Government has announced a new Industrial Policy which lays emphasis on the development of cottage and small industries widely dispersed throughout the country. This should help in achieving our goal of rapidly increasing employment. This policy which also covers the role of public sector and large industries, indigenous and foreign technology, foreign investment, workers' participation and related matters, will go a long way in removing any uncertainty in this regard and lead to a revival of investment.

In the sphere of foreign trade, India's exports have made further advance during the year. The Government has adopted a deliberate policy of minimising the social cost of our exports and has regulated the exports of essential items such as sugar, rice, oil, oilseeds, fresh vegetables and cement. The adverse impact of this on export earnings has been more than made good by encouraging the growth of exports in the dynamic sectors.

Long years of shortages of domestically produced commodities and imports have led to a host of controls and regulations through the economy. Government is keen that those that have outlived their utility should be removed so that the enterprise and initiative of the people have full play in determining economic activity. The current state of the economy is such that such a policy can be effectively pursued. Already the policy and procedures regarding exports and imports and industrial licensing have been examined with this objective in mind. A committee has been constituted to study comprehensively the entire systems of controls and make recommendations to reduce and streamline them.

Industrial unrest will lead to loss in production and this will not be in anybody's interest. I appeal to employers, employees and others concerned to ensure harmonious industrial relations so that growth is not affected. In this context, I would like to refer to the study group set up by Government to examine this difficult subject. I hope the recommendations of the study group will help in the evolution of a rational wage and income policy.

My Government attaches great importance to the need of overhauling the educational system with a view to meeting the challenge of development as well as providing opportunities of public service to the students. The problem of illiteracy on such a large scale as prevails also requires to be given priority attention. We have thus to think of educational policies in terms of not only academic but also adult education. In fact, if the country is to make accelerated progress towards the goal we have set before it, the spread of literacy on mass scale is indispensable. Various avenues of consultation with educational authorities have been explored by the Ministry of Education and as a result, guidelines in respect of different fields of education, namely university education, secondary education and primary and adult education have been prepared and enhanced provision is being made in the Central and State plans.

Government attaches the full importance to the promotion of science and technology in order to improve the quality and content of the lives of our people and be conducive to increasing employment. Research effort is being stepped up and made more relevant to our immediate problems in natural resources survey, in agriculture and industry and in energy sources. Government has taken up the implementation of a National Satellite Project. Through this project significant improvement in communications, meteorological and disaster-warning services will become available to the country.

I must refer now to a matter of great importance to our future well-being. The family planning programme has suffered a set-back this year as a reaction to the excesses committed during the Emergency. We cannot afford to allow this trend in this vital matter. The fact that we are keen that family planning should be wholly voluntary requires that there should be a much greater effort towards education and motivation. I appeal to the State Governments and to all people to recognise the importance of the programme and to assist in the measures to achieve the national targets.

Another subject of vital importance to family welfare and to the discharge of constitutional responsibility is prohibition. As decided in the Conference of Chief Ministers and Ministers held last year, prohibition will be introduced throughout the country in a phased manner during the next four years. The details of the phased programme are being worked out in consultation with the States.

Hon'ble Members, I now come to our relations with other countries. My Government has spared no effort in striving to make our subcontinent an area of peace and cooperation, through a series of initiatives in our bilateral relations with neighbouring countries. Agreement was reached with Bangladesh on the sharing of the Ganga Waters. We have approached our relations with other neighbours like Bhutan, Nepal, Afghanistan, Burma*, Sri Lanka and Pakistan in the same spirit, based on equality, mutual respect and appreciation of each other's sensitivities and aspirations. In particular, our bilateral relations with Iran have registered an improvement which only an enlightened approach to mutual understanding could have achieved.

Although differences relating to the border remain unresolved, we are gradually improving bilateral relations with China on the basis of the 'Panchsheel'. My Government has recognised the importance of developing close relations with the countries in South-East Asia. We have made significant strides in beginning to build bridges of cooperation with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and other States of Indo-China and with the Commonwealth countries in this region. For the first time, the Commonwealth Heads of Governments of the region met together recently

* Now known as Myanmar.

and discussed methods of increasing mutual cooperation. With Japan, there is a deeper understanding and realisation that Indo-Japanese relations can be a contributing factor in achieving peace and promoting development in Asia.

The Government has based its relations with the Great Powers on the firm belief in a commitment to genuine non-alignment, beneficial bilateralism and furtherance of constructive international cooperation. We are confident that the many sided cooperation and understanding which we have built with the Soviet Union and other Socialist countries will be strengthened and enriched. We have achieved cordiality and friendship in our relations with the United States of America and Western democracies with whom we share a common belief in the democratic system of Government. It is our hope that notwithstanding the differences which we may have had in the past, we can now foster these relations to a new level and quality of mutual confidence which will transcend differences on specific matters and enlarge the area of understanding and faith in each other.

Tensions still beset specific areas of the world, particularly in Southern Africa and West Asia. We have continued to support the African countries and their liberation movements in the struggle against colonialism and racialism and have pledged our political and material support to the liberation movements in Namibia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. We cannot over-emphasise the need for unity amongst the African leaders in dealing with the common enemy of racialism and colonialism. In West Asia, we continue to hold the view that a just and lasting settlement based on the withdrawal of Israeli forces from all occupied territories, and in accordance with the resolutions of the United Nations which secure the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and security for all States of the region, is essential durable peace in that region.

My Government has strengthened India's constructive participation in international forums—in the United Nations, in the non-aligned world, in the Commonwealth and in the conference on International Economic Cooperation.

We are convinced that the enormous problems facing both the developing and the developed countries can be solved only if there is peace and stability in all parts of the world. In order to bring this about, it is essential that the major nuclear powers arrive at an early agreement on test ban, on reduction and ultimate elimination of all nuclear weapons, and on peaceful exploitation of atomic energy on the basis of respect for sovereignty, equality and non-discrimination. Nuclear disarmament is a matter of foremost concern to all the countries of the world and we hope that at the Disarmament Conference proposed to be held later this year the major nuclear powers will be able to announce an agreed and time-bound programme of disarmament. For our part, we have reiterated our solemn resolve to use nuclear energy only for peaceful purposes and have also

made it clear that we will unilaterally desist from making nuclear tests. We are, however, opposed to any form of discrimination in this vital sector.

Hon'ble Members, during this Session you have to consider the Statement of Receipts and Expenditure and the Demands for Grants for the coming financial year which will determine the new direction in which the country will progress in the coming years. You will have to finalise the legislative measures already pending with you and also deal with the new ones that will be presented, to some of which I have earlier made mention. Many of these measures are of far-reaching importance in strengthening our democratic polity and economy. You thus have a very heavy agenda before you. I would not therefore detain you any longer. I summon you to your endeavours and wish you all success.

Jai Hind.