

ADDRESS TO PARLIAMENT—25 MARCH 1998

Lok Sabha	—	Twelfth Lok Sabha
Session	—	First Session after the 12th General Election
President of India	—	Shri K. R. Narayanan
Vice-President of India	—	Shri Krishan Kant
Prime Minister of India	—	Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee
Speaker, Lok Sabha	—	Shri G.M.C. Balayogi

HON'BLE MEMBERS,

I have great pleasure in addressing this first session of both Houses of Parliament after the 12th General Election to the Lok Sabha. I extend my warm felicitations to the members of the new Lok Sabha.

I thank the Election Commission of India for conducting the General Election with despatch and efficiency.

The just concluded mid-term election reflected the firm conviction of our people in democratic processes of change. Contrary to forecasts that the turnout would be low, in fact, nearly 62 per cent of the electorate exercised their franchise. The results are indicative of regional aspirations seeking a place in the national perspective. My Government will ensure the fulfilment of these aspirations even while looking after national interests.

Parliamentary arithmetic alone cannot provide the key to good governance. That key lies in the willingness of all to rise above notions of parliamentary majority and minority and work in a spirit of cooperation, conciliation and consensus. My Government, imbued with this spirit, will chart a new course in governance that seeks to unify and not divide: dialogue, debate and discussion will replace the narrow antagonisms of the past.

After the mid-term election, the nation now looks forward to a Government that will get down to business. This is precisely what the Government proposes to do: The most immediate tasks include the passage of the Supplementary Demands for 1997-98 and the Vote on Account for 1998-99. Thereafter, pending matters, including legislative business, will be taken up in right earnest.

Starting now, all our efforts will be directed at building a New India—an India free from the triple-curse of insecurity, hunger and corruption; an India free from illiteracy and disease; an India where more and more people are gainfully employed; an India where every citizen, irrespective of his caste, creed or faith, feels proud to be an Indian.

Secularism is integral to India's traditions. My Government is unequivocally committed to upholding our secular values.

My Government's top priority will be to reach out to the underprivileged and the unempowered. More than a third of our people live below the poverty line. An even larger number does not have access to basic education and health-care facilities. This vast multitude must be facilitated to obtain its meaningful share in national prosperity.

Government proposes to accomplish this through the three-fold strategy of ensuring food security to every household by better targeting of the Public Distribution System, accelerating generation of employment opportunities in every sector of the economy and providing shelter to the largest possible number.

One of the weaknesses of socio-economic policies so far has been the less than adequate attention to the social sector. The Government is pledged to investing larger resources in social infrastructure. The commitment to progressively step up spending on education to 6 per cent of GDP will be fulfilled. Every effort shall be made to provide basic health facilities to all. Simultaneously, potable drinking water shall be made available in every village and habitat, within a specified time-frame.

Our population growth rate is a matter of grave concern. The Government will soon formulate a National Population Policy which will aim at stabilising the population growth through, among other things, incentives and disincentives.

In a civil society, children are born to be happy. Unfortunately, large numbers of children in our society are born only to toil in factories, workshops and fields. My Government believes that children should be in schools and playgrounds and not toiling away their childhood. Apart from implementing the constitutional provision of free and compulsory primary education, Government will introduce a National Charter for Children which, among other things, will ensure that no child goes to sleep hungry. Children have rights, and these will be upheld.

Special efforts will be made to remove gender disparities and injustice that exist, especially in access to education, employment opportunities and political representation. Government will provide free education to women up to graduation so that India can become an example of a developing country overcoming the handicap of poor female literacy. By investing in

education for women, my Government will be investing in the future generations of Indians.

The pending legislation seeking to reserve 33 per cent seats for women in Parliament and State Assemblies will be taken up immediately. A Development Bank, the first of its kind, will be set up for women entrepreneurs.

By synergising legal, executive and societal efforts, the Government will strive for rapid social, economic and political empowerment and uplift of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes and Minorities. My Government will take all appropriate measures to uphold existing percentages of reservation in educational institutions at the State level. In keeping with its belief that governance must seek to unify rather than divide, Government will strive for social harmony and justice in place of social conflict and injustice.

Prosperity and economic well-being cannot be the privilege of a few; it must percolate to the last person in the last row. Hence, my Government will pursue the twin objectives of total eradication of poverty through generation of employment opportunities as well as sustaining a higher GDP growth of 7 to 8 per cent. The Central theme of my Government's national development plan will be "Berozgari Hatao".

Shelter is a basic human necessity. The Government will evolve policies to accelerate the construction of housing units and facilitate the participation of private sector in order to ensure that housing for all becomes a reality.

Urgent measures will be taken to substantially step up investment in the infrastructure sectors, including power, roads and bridges, railways, inland waterways, seaports, shipping, airports, telecommunications and information technology. Government will evolve a sound framework for fiscal and monetary policies.

The Government believes that India can — and shall — be built by Indians. No country that is largely or entirely dependent on resources from abroad can truly prosper. Hence, efforts will be made to increase national saving to 30 per cent of the GDP over the next five years. Foreign Direct Investment will be encouraged in the core sector of the economy and in physical infrastructure development.

About 40 per cent of our GDP comes from the unincorporated sector, which has so far been neglected. The Government proposes to evolve an appropriate policy framework for facilitating the growth of millions of small enterprises that exist in the country. For meeting the financial requirements of this crucial sector of the economy, which has a very high potential for growth and generation of employment opportunities, Government will consider the setting up of a dedicated Development Bank.

The Government will ensure, to make labour an equal partner in national reconstruction. Special care will be taken to look after the interests of agricultural labour who are largely unorganised.

Agriculture has suffered on account of declining investment. Government will halt this decline and earmark up to 60 per cent of Plan funds for this crucial segment of our economy. Subsidies will continue but they will be better targeted. Government is committed to re-establish our farmers as a strong and self-confident community enjoying the fruits of prosperity.

Apart from setting into motion plans for all-round development of rural India, my Government will also cushion farmers from unforeseen natural calamities by introducing effective crop insurance policies. All efforts will be made for rapid rural industrialisation, with special emphasis on agro-based industry.

Since maintenance of ecological balance is crucial for our survival, the Government will initiate institutional measures to ensure that all development programmes are in conformity with the principles of sustainable development. Government firmly believes that science and technology have a vital role to play in the achievement of sustainable development and transforming India into a prosperous, strong and self-confident nation.

On Centre-State relations, my Government will immediately act on the Sarkaria Commission's recommendations as well as seek ways and means for greater devolution of powers up to the panchayat level. The Governor's office has often been the centre of unseemly controversy. Raj Bhavans will not be used for securing political objectives.

The Government will set up a Committee to study the feasibility of treating all the 18 languages included in Schedule VIII of the Constitution as official languages.

The Government will attend to the States' demand for higher allocation of resources. A Backward Areas Commission will be set up to identify those areas which need extra assistance so that they do not lag behind in development.

Government is committed to initiate action to carve out Uttaranchal* in Uttar Pradesh, Vananchal in Bihar and Chhattisgarh in Madhya Pradesh. Delhi will be given full Statehood.

A National Water Policy which will provide for effective and prompt settlement of disputes and their time-bound implementation will be evolved.

Security of the nation and its citizens is paramount. My Government will not compromise on this. The nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity will be protected at all costs. We will not bow to any pressure on this front.

* Now known as Uttarakhand.

My Government joins the country in saluting the bravery of the personnel of our armed forces who are ever prepared to make sacrifices for the defence of the nation.

Every citizen has the right to feel secure and be free from fear. Government will strive to combat the menace of terrorism, subversion and insurgency that has come to haunt the common man. Violence has no place in a democracy. Differences should - and can - be resolved through dialogue and discussion.

My Government re-affirms India's commitment to peace among all nations, to the prosperity of the peoples of the world and to enhance its role in the international arena. We will strive for Asian solidarity and enhanced regional cooperation. Renewed efforts will be made to improve bilateral relationships with neighbouring countries without any third party mediation or interference.

One of the urgent issues before the world community is the re-structuring of the United Nations and its organs in order to make it more democratic and more representative of the contemporary world. Our views on the re-structuring of the United Nations have been projected before the world community and we will pursue our objective with vigour. As a founder member of the non-aligned movement, we, along with our fellow members, share the responsibility for ensuring a fair treatment for the developing countries and we will work together to attain this goal. Economic cooperation among developing countries is another priority of the non-aligned movement which we will seek to promote.

The Government will evolve a National Media Policy which will integrate the advances in various visual, audio and print media in order to bring about a cohesiveness of purpose, keeping in view our societal needs and cultural values.

Fifty years after Independence, the time has come to rejuvenate our institutions so that they are strong enough to meet the challenges of the future. The Government proposes to do so, as well as appoint a Commission to review the Constitution and make recommendations so that anomalous experiences of the past are not repeated in the future.

Earlier, I have referred to the Government's solemn commitment to providing the people of India with good governance. This can be possible only when Government rests on the foundation of morality and ethics. All around us today we find increasing cynicism towards morality in politics and ethics in governance. This has severely eroded faith in the State.

The Government proposes to make all those who hold public office accountable by enacting the Lok Pal Bill. The Official Secrets Act will be reviewed so that we can put in place a right to information law that will

enable transparency and integrity in decision making without compromising national security.

One of the causes of corruption and corrosion of values in our polity, as well as criminalisation of politics, stems from flaws in the electoral process. To ensure free, fair and fearless elections and to prevent the use of money and muscle power, Government will introduce a comprehensive Electoral Reforms Bill for which considerable ground work has already been done.

Consensus-building is an essential part of nation-building. Cooperation for the larger good of society has been the cornerstone of our civilisation. Ours is a multi-party democracy in which constructive dialogue, consultation and cooperation between the ruling and the opposition parties are essential for evolving a broad platform of national consensus.

The Government will, therefore, strive for evolving a consensus mode of governance as far as practicable. Some of the issues on which a national consensus is most urgently called for are electoral reforms; Centre-State relations; population policy; empowerment of women by legislating 33 per cent reservation for them in all elected bodies; resolution of inter-State water disputes; environmental protection and effective institutional guarantees for the welfare of the weaker sections of society while pursuing economic reforms.

Hon'ble Members, you have the rare privilege of contributing constructively to this process of consensus-building on which the future of our great nation depends critically in the 21st Century and the coming millennium.

This year is significant in more ways than one. It is the Golden Jubilee of our Independence. It also marks the 50th anniversary of the martyrdom of Mahatma Gandhi—one of the greatest men of this Century. We are the inheritors of the fruits of the sacrifices made by the Mahatma and other freedom fighters. We have the responsibility to live up to their dreams and ideals.

My best wishes are with you in this momentous task.

Jai Hind.