

LOK SABHA DEBATES

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LOK SABHA

Friday, February 23, 2007 / Phalguna 4, 1928 (Saka)

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The Lok Sabha met at Thirty five minutes past Twelve of the Clock

(MR. SPEAKER in the Chair)

NATIONAL ANTHEM

The National Anthem was played.

Title: Secretary- General laid the President's Address to both House of Parliament assembled together on 23.02.2007.

SECRETARY-GENERAL: Sir, I beg to lay on the Table a copy of the President's Address ** (Hindi & English Versions) to both Houses of Parliament assembled together on the 23rd February, 2007.

* The President delivered the Address in the Central Hall in English . Hindi text of the Address was read by the Vice- President there.

** Also placed in Library. See No. LT 5788/2007

Honourable Members,

This is a very special year for our country. We are celebrating the 60th anniversary of our Independence. This year, we also observe the 150th anniversary of the First War of Indian Independence and the Centenary of Satyagraha. These are occasions for us to renew our commitment to building a strong, modern, inclusive, secular and dynamic India.

I would like to begin, by expressing my sincere condolences for the innocent victims of the das-tard-ly and cynical terrorist attack on Samjhauta Express. Our hearts go out to the families of these innocent people. We should not allow this tragic event to affect our common quest for normalization of relations between India and Pakistan.

We meet here today at a time of great optimism about our economic performance and prospects. The last three years have recorded an average annual rate of growth of national income of over 8%. By all estimates, we will grow by close to 9% in the current year. This augurs well for the launch of the Eleventh Five Year Plan. My Government has set a target of attaining an annual growth rate of 9% during the Eleventh Plan. Given current trends and the general policy direction, this is a feasible proposition. However, economic growth is not an end in itself. It is a means by which we hope to generate more employment, distribute incomes more equitably, across social groups and regions, and liberate the poorest of the poor from the scourge of poverty, ignorance and disease.

My government recognizes that keeping a check on inflation is an essential element of any strategy for inclusive growth. During the first half of 2006, my Government took a number of steps to insulate our people from the fallout of the steep increase in global oil

prices and resurgence in global commodity prices. However, in recent months, the rate of inflation has shown an upward trend. As growth and investment accelerate rapidly and incomes rise, there is bound to be a rising demand for all products, particularly products of day-to-day consumption. This rise in demand has to be met by a rise in supply which takes some time to materialize. During the last eight weeks, my Government has taken a number of fiscal and monetary steps to moderate inflation. Besides, a number of steps have been taken to improve supplies of essential commodities. My Government will continue to take all necessary steps to ensure that the poor, are not adversely affected by inflation. This is our solemn commitment.

To sustain the growth process and to fiscally empower the Government to address its commitment to inclusive growth, it is essential that our public finances are managed with prudence and wisdom. Fiscal responsibility is not an academic obsession. It is a prudent course of action aimed at ensuring the sustainability of our growth process, ensuring equity and keeping inflation under check.

My Government has decided that the goal of the Eleventh Plan would be to ensure that economic growth is not just faster, but also more inclusive and equitable. The Eleventh Plan strategy will aim at putting the economy on a sustainable, accelerated, growth trajectory and creating productive employment opportunities across the country in all sectors of the economy. The Approach Paper of the Eleventh Five Year Plan has identified nine major challenges facing the economy. These are: (1) regaining agricultural dynamism; (2) changing employment patterns and generating new jobs; (3) providing essential public services to the poor; (4) increasing manufacturing competitiveness; (5) developing human resources; (6) building world class infrastructure; (7) protecting the environment; (8) improving rehabilitation and resettlement practices; (9) improving governance. By addressing these challenges, we will address the larger challenge of inclusive growth.

My Government is building a new architecture of inclusive growth. This architecture consists of Bharat Nirman, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the National Rural Health Mission, the strengthened and expanded Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the universalisation of the Mid-day Meal and ICDS Programmes and the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission. Considerable progress has been made under each of these flagship programmes of the Government. Most of the yearly targets have been met for projects undertaken through Bharat Nirman, except in a few States. Programmes for rural roads, rural electrification, rural telephony, rural housing and rural drinking water supply are on track. States that are lagging behind, especially the less developed parts of the country, have been urged to pay greater attention to implementation issues.

The National Rural Health Mission aims to improve the health status of people through a partnership between the Central and State Governments, Panchayati Raj institutions and the community in the management of primary health facilities. The Mission is focused on improving public health indicators through decentralised district level planning. About 3.2 lakh village-based accredited women social health activists (ASHA) have so far been inducted in 18 demographically weaker states.

The Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission is under implementation in 63 cities. City Development Plans have already been prepared for 61 cities, charting out their vision and goals in urban governance and development. These plans also include investment plans with a focus on provision of city-wide urban infrastructure services such as water supply, sanitation, drainage, basic services and social housing to the urban poor. So far, 102 projects for slum improvement and development have been sanctioned. Our cities desperately need major reform of urban governance and improved and democratic functioning of our municipalities. This is being encouraged and a new draft law to facilitate street vendors is being finalized in consultation with all stakeholders.

Each of these programmes will generate additional employment, a major focus area of my Government. A sustained increase in the rate of investment, which has touched a record level of 34% of GDP, will generate additional employment. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) passed by my Government has emerged as a very major programme both for providing a social safety net to the poor as well as for building rural infrastructure. Over 1.4 crore households have benefited under the scheme operational in 200 districts. Over 500,000 works are under operation under the NREGA in different parts of the country of which over half is in the area of water conservation and drought proofing, contributing to rebuilding of the natural resource base. A social safety net of this dimension has never been undertaken in the world. Therefore it is being observed with great interest. My Government is committed to covering the whole country under the NREGA in five years from the coming into force of it and more districts will be taken up in the next year.

Mahatma Gandhi's vision of Gram Swaraj was given a legal framework through the efforts of late Shri Rajiv Gandhi. My Government is committed to deepening Panchayati Raj and therefore has taken up the task of strengthening decentralized district planning through an integrated plan for removal of backwardness in 250 districts. The Backward Regions Grant Fund is designed to fill gaps in critical development interventions based on local assessments.

My Government attaches the highest importance to education. As a nation of young people, India will be able to gain from a demographic dividend only if we invest in the capabilities and the intellectual and emotional development of our children. There has been a quantum leap in the funds allocated for primary and secondary education during the last three years. The strengthened Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and Mid-day Meal Programme reaffirm our commitment to the empowerment of our children through education. Under the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya Scheme, over 2000 new residential schools at upper primary level have been

sanctioned in the last 3 years for girls belonging predominantly to SC, ST, OBC and minority communities.

The rights of women and children and their aspirations are of paramount importance in our march towards an inclusive and equitable society. Keeping in view the Constitutional provisions and in order to give greater focus to issues relating to women and children, an independent Ministry of Women & Child Development has been created. This emphasizes the importance being given to women as equal partners in development. Landmark legislations that ensure women's safety and protecting them from domestic violence have been enacted. Investment in the well-being of children is an investment in the future of the country. Eradication of malnutrition is receiving topmost priority, including through a rapid expansion of anganwadis whose numbers will reach one million soon. At the same time issues relating to child protection are high on my Government's agenda.

The focus of our efforts in higher education is to revitalise the system, expand access and build new institutions of excellence. My Government attaches great importance to increasing access to education for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and the socially and educationally backward sections among Minorities. It is also committed to rewarding hard work and merit among all students. The National Knowledge Commission has submitted its first report placing emphasis on the need to invest in education at all levels of the knowledge pyramid. My Government is committed to revitalizing vocational and technical education. Several new Indian Institutes of Science, Education and Research, Indian Institutes of Technology and Indian Institutes of Information Technology are proposed to be set up in various parts of the country. New Central Universities are being set up in the North Eastern region.

My Government is committed to providing food security to the poor and is taking further steps to strengthen the public distribution system. Wheat production has been low but wheat stocks have been replenished in order to control the rise in prices. At the same time, the minimum support prices for wheat and coarse cereals have been suitably enhanced as an incentive for higher production. Timely and appropriate decisions have improved the lot of sugarcane farmers, reducing sugarcane arrears to an all time low. For coordinated and focussed attention on the issues of dryland and rainfed farming, the National Rainfed Area Authority has been set up to guide policy in this regard. The National Fisheries Development Board has been set up to enhance the productivity of our marine and inland fisheries. The National Horticulture Mission is helping farmers diversify into more income generating crops.

Honourable members are already aware of the steep increase in credit availability for agriculture. The target of doubling credit flow to agriculture and allied activities has been met. A Rs.13,000 crore package for the revival of the cooperative credit structure has also been worked out and is under implementation. To give a thrust to agricultural research and transfer new technologies to the field, a National Agriculture Innovation Project (NAIP) has been approved. Efforts are also on for improving productivity of plantation crops like Coconut, Tea and Coffee and several new schemes have been formulated.

A special package amounting to more than Rs.16,000 crores is being implemented in 31 districts worst affected by farmers' suicides. The interventions cover short term as well as long term measures and address issues of credit, irrigation facilities, agriculture inputs and alternative sources of income. An expert group is looking into the problem of agricultural indebtedness and will suggest measures to provide relief to farmers in distress.

Taken together, all these initiatives of my Government will increase the rate of investment in agriculture, enhance production and productivity growth, increase farmers' incomes and welfare and unleash the Second Green Revolution. It is heartening that agricultural growth in 2005-06 was 6%. However, this needs to be sustained through credible measures, which maintain a high rate of investment, bring new technologies and farming systems into use, improve marketing channels, provide better risk management facilities and generate better returns to our farmers. This, my Government is committed to doing.

Acquisition of agricultural land for industrial development and related purposes and the terms of compensation have become issues of major public concern in our country. On the one hand there are genuine concerns of farmers regarding acquisition of agricultural land and on the other hand, there is a need to use land to generate employment through industry and related activities. Therefore, issues of humane rehabilitation and the need for fair pricing of agricultural land need to be addressed both in policy and in law. My Government is committed to bringing in a new rehabilitation policy, which will be backed by amendments in the Land Acquisition Act wherever necessary.

My Government recognizes the serious nature of the problem of water availability and water use, both in agriculture and in the urban economy. We need a social consensus on water management practices, including participatory irrigation management; regulated use and conservation of water; timely completion of irrigation projects and maintenance of existing projects to ensure water availability to farmers; improved ground water recharge and rain water harvesting. My Government is committed to developing both the irrigation potential of the country and its hydro-power potential.

Taking care of our environment and ensuring ecological sustainability of our growth process is a major challenge, nationally as well as globally. The threat of climate change and global warming will have adverse consequences for life on our planet and for our development prospects. We need economically affordable, technologically feasible and socially equitable policies to deal with the

challenge of sustainable development. Drawing on the wisdom of Mahatma Gandhi who said, "the Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed", the international community must evolve a framework for sustainable development that takes into account the growth aspirations of the developing world. India is committed to promote environmentally sustainable development strategies. A major programme for massive afforestation of degraded forest lands, "Green India", is under active consideration of my Government.

Our Wild Life is our invaluable heritage. My Government took several corrective steps for sanctuaries on the basis of the recommendations of the Tiger Task Force. A Tiger Conservation Authority has been constituted as well as a Wildlife Crime Control Bureau. The Government proposes to strengthen activities for environment education and respect for wildlife through the school curriculum.

My Government recognizes the vital importance of the food processing sector in improving the incomes of the farming community and generating employment in rural areas. The Government's Vision 2015 for the sector aims to triple the size of the food sector in the next decade. A National Institute of Food Technology, Entrepreneurship & Management is proposed to be set up. With a view to ensuring that our food sector matches up to the best global standards, my Government enacted an integrated food law called the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006, and a Food Safety Authority is being established shortly. This autonomous Authority will set standards and license the manufacture of food products which are healthy and safe.

The focus on "inclusive growth" has also meant giving special attention to the needs of the weaker sections of our society. My government attaches great importance to social justice and to the social, educational and economic empowerment of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs, Minorities, women and children. Education empowers by creating capabilities. Hence, my Government has extended scholarships to SC and ST students and widened access to higher education for OBCs. To empower the most deprived among the Scheduled Castes, my Government has launched a new "Self Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers Scheme". My Government has made considerable progress in filling the backlog of unfilled reserved posts for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and is committed to filling up the rest.

At its last session, the Parliament enacted a historic bill to provide rights over land to Scheduled Tribes and forest dwellers on land historically in their occupation but classified as forests. This is a path-breaking legislation which will provide security to these sections, prevent their harassment and enhance their livelihoods. We have formulated a National Tribal Policy addressing important concerns of the tribal community.

My Government is committed to the welfare of the minorities, especially the most backward among them. A separate Ministry of Minority Affairs has been created to ensure focused attention on the welfare of all our minorities. A High Level Committee chaired by Justice Rajindar Sachar was appointed to report on the social, economic and educational status of the Muslim community of India. The report was tabled in Parliament on 30th November, 2006 and will be discussed in this Session. We will take all measures necessary to ensure that the fruits of development are shared equitably and backward minority groups become active participants and beneficiaries of our growth processes. My Government is considering the formulation of a programme for those districts and towns that have the highest concentration of minority populations.

The Prime Minister's New 15 Point Programme for the Welfare of Minorities was adopted last year. The programme has identified certain important developmental schemes and created a mechanism to ensure that the benefits of these schemes flow equitably to the minority communities also. Certain minority communities continue to remain relatively backward, with a large number of out-of-school children, high dropout rates and low educational attainments. These require focused intervention. In addition to the existing schemes, my Government proposes to introduce comprehensive scholarship schemes from primary to post graduate levels for eligible students belonging to the minorities. My Government firmly commits itself to equity and welfare of all sections of society.

To sustain the growth process we have to ensure energy security. Accelerated economic development and growing demand for commercial energy require a new paradigm of energy security for India. There is urgent need for a national consensus on energy pricing and distribution policies. My Government is conscious of the need to augment energy supplies from both conventional and renewable sources. The coal sector will continue to remain the mainstay of energy security for the country. Therefore, it is imperative that coal production is substantially increased in the coming years. A number of steps have been taken to achieve this objective. Simultaneously, my Government will encourage new investment in power generation. Competitive tariff bids have already been approved for setting up of two Ultra Mega Power Projects and further efforts in this direction will continue. The tremendous hydropower potential in the country will also be harnessed with the cooperation and willing support of the state governments concerned. My Government has taken important steps to help develop the full potential of civilian nuclear energy and of all sources of renewable energy, both for meeting energy needs and to address concerns on environment.

My Government has placed great emphasis on building world class infrastructure in our country. The National Highway Development Programme has been greatly expanded with an investment target of Rs.227,000 crores. The Golden Quadrilateral is nearing completion. Work for construction of the North-South and East-West corridors has also been awarded. The Government has also approved 4-laning of around 4,000 km of national highways and 6-laning of 6,500 km of national highways, including the Golden Quadrilateral. My Government is implementing the Special Accelerated Road Development Programme for the North-East, keeping in view the urgent need to improve connectivity to the region.

My Government has succeeded in ensuring a turnaround of Indian Railways. Over the last 30 months, railway freight volumes have grown by 8-10% and growth in passenger volumes has doubled. Container business has been opened up to private businesses. As a result of improved supply and demand management, rational utilization of capacity and a market-driven pricing policy, Indian Railways are once again on track. It is necessary that this momentum is maintained. For this, modernization and creation of additional infrastructure would be vital. Infrastructure development through public private partnerships will be promoted. There has been an encouraging response to the offer to allow private container trains. Preliminary work on the proposed Dedicated Rail Freight Corridor has begun. The project will provide the necessary infrastructure support for growth in container, coal and other mineral traffic. This project is proceeding on a fast track basis and a Special Purpose Vehicle called the Dedicated Freight Corridor Corporation of India Limited has been formed to implement the project.

The civil aviation sector has witnessed unprecedented growth in recent years. My Government has initiated the modernization of major airports in the country and liberalization of air services to cope with rapidly growing air traffic demand. Investment in airport development is on an upswing.

In order to keep pace with our fast increasing share of global trade, my Government has taken up a programme for massive capacity expansion of port infrastructure. An Indian maritime University is proposed to be set up in Chennai with regional campuses at Kolkata, Mumbai and Visakhapatnam. Stretches of Godavari and Mahanadi are also proposed to be declared as inland waterways.

My Government has made serious attempts to promote Public Private Partnerships as a strategy for building infrastructure such as roads, ports, airports and power generation. Such a strategy brings in additional investment which adds to limited public sector resources. Further, private sector efficiency results in lower costs, quicker completion of projects and better delivery of services. Substantial improvements can be seen in these sectors as a result of these efforts.

Honourable Members will be happy to learn that in 2006-07 the rate of growth of manufacturing sector output was estimated at close to 11%. The performance of key sectors, like the automotive industry, textiles, pharmaceuticals, steel, petrochemicals, cement and so on has been impressive. We have clearly succeeded in re-energising domestic enterprise. The National Strategy for Manufacturing prepared by the National Manufacturing Competitiveness Council provides a basis for accelerated industrial and employment growth. An Automotive Mission Plan 2006-2016 has been prepared to provide the framework for the growth of the auto sector in India. The industrial sector has also benefited from increased inflows of foreign direct investment. Here too, FDI inflows have exceeded US\$10 billion this year and also exceeded FII inflows for the first time ever .

It is a matter of satisfaction that our textile industry has been able to generate considerable employment and promote exports and improve its performance in the post- Multi Fibre Agreement regime. A focused approach to helping weavers is in place with an increase in the number of cluster development centers, more yarn depots, support to technology upgradation, health and life insurance programmes for weavers and a new "Handloom Mark" for branding handloom products.

My Government has restructured the Kendriya Khadi and Village Industries Commission. The Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Rural Industries has been set up at Wardha to further promote rural industries which provide gainful employment to a very large section of our rural population. The Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Act 2006 has become operational. This will facilitate the promotion, development and enhancement of competitiveness of these enterprises. My Government is committed to providing a minimum social safety net for workers in the unorganized sector and a draft law for this purpose is under consideration. My Government will launch a massive skill development programme to improve the skills and capabilities of our work force through a Mission on Vocational Education and other initiatives. This is essential if we have to take advantage of the demographic dividend that we are going to have through an increasingly youthful workforce.

Our Information Technology sector continues to develop and remain globally competitive. The year 2007 will be the Year of Broadband. We are committed to bridging the digital divide by providing broadband coverage throughout the country. My Government is encouraging the growth of the electronic hardware industry and the semiconductor industry. My Government will take forward the National Identity Card Project under the National e-Governance Plan for nationwide roll-out in a phased manner so as to ensure better delivery of services to our citizens.

Tourism has enormous potential and we are already seeing its benefits. In recent months, there has been an impressive growth in foreign tourist arrivals, foreign exchange earnings and employment generation. However, given the potential of tourism and India's

rich heritage and diversity, we can do much more to increase the number of domestic as well as foreign tourists. Apart from improving the quality of tourism infrastructure, my Government is encouraging public private partnerships in tourism across the country.

To sustain our efforts in the advanced fields of modern science and technology we must increase the number of scientists and improve the quality of Indian science. My Government is deeply concerned about the inadequate enrolment of students in basic sciences and that Indian science is lagging behind other newly industrializing economies. India needs a new thrust in the field of science and technology. There is also a need to energise our university system and enable it to respond to the pressures of the market so that it can retain and attract talent.

A Vision for the development of an empowered S&T base by 2015 has been prepared. Steps will be taken to attract talent, rejuvenate university research, enable women scientists to re-enter careers in science, strengthen technology business incubation processes, promote excellence in research, engage private sector in R&D and create greater science awareness and a scientific temper among our people. My Government intends to increase the financial allocation for science and technology from less than 1% of GDP to 2% of GDP.

Our scientists have distinguished themselves in the fields of nuclear energy, space, bio-technology, genetics and pharmaceuticals. This year has witnessed impressive achievements in our space programme. The recent ninth consecutive successful launch of PSLV, placing four satellites precisely in predetermined orbit, and the Space Capsule Recovery Experiment as also the progress being made in preparation for the Chandrayaan Mission testify to the well-deserved reputation for excellence that ISRO and our space programme enjoy. The Department of Atomic Energy, which is engaged in harnessing nuclear technology to produce safe, economic and eco-friendly energy using indigenous resources, has brought on stream the indigenously developed 540 MWe Units 3 & 4 at Tarapur. We are committed to the development of our indigenous three stage nuclear programme.

My government is paying special attention to the modernization of the police forces, security forces and intelligence agencies. A focused and holistic attempt to deal with the challenges of internal security in the North Eastern Region, in Jammu & Kashmir and in regions affected by naxalite activity is yielding dividends. My government recognizes the challenge posed by terrorism and extremism and has been resolute in dealing with it. While our security and intelligence agencies have successfully foiled many attempts by terrorist groups to strike terror, there have been tragic, dastardly and cowardly acts of terrorism, as in Mumbai and Assam and, most recently, in the attack on Samjhauta Express. My Government is dealing firmly with the challenge posed.

While ensuring law and order and internal security in the North east, Jammu & Kashmir and naxalite affected regions, my government will remain focused on the overall social, economic and cultural development of these parts of our country, aimed at ensuring the active participation of all sections of our society in the national mainstream. My Government will continue to impart a healing touch both in Jammu & Kashmir and in the North East, while maintaining utmost vigil against terrorist and extremist forces. My government attaches the highest importance to ensuring that all agencies respect basic human rights, even in the most trying circumstances.

There is growing public concern about urban crime and violence, especially involving children and women. My Government is committed to making our police forces more sensitive to the concerns and needs of our citizens, and more efficient and humane in responding to them.

My government is committed to judicial reforms aimed at speeding up the justice delivery system and ensuring greater efficiency, transparency and integrity in our judicial system, especially where it impacts on the welfare of our citizens. A Bill for setting up the National Judicial Council for greater accountability and transparency in the judiciary has already been tabled in Parliament. The Grameen Nyayalay Bill for setting up people-friendly local courts with flexibility of procedures for speedier disposal of petty cases, is on the anvil.

The Defence of the country is an unshakeable commitment of my Government. At a time when new and unconventional threats to national security are increasingly visible, even while the strategic environment continues to be fragile, the Government shall maintain focus on strengthening the Defence of the country. We shall provide our Armed Forces with the best possible means to do so. My government is investing in the modernization of our Armed Forces and of our indigenous Defence industry, to make them fully capable of dealing with existing and emerging challenges. Our Armed Forces have also been engaged in cooperative exercises with many partner countries, and their performance has invariably come in for praise. The nation is grateful to them for their contribution. The welfare of our ex-servicemen is a priority of my Government.

My Government's foreign policy has been shaped by the desire to create an external environment conducive to peace and stability in the region, ensuring our accelerated economic development and the safeguarding of our national security. In pursuit of this enlightened national interest, my Government has undertaken a comprehensive engagement with the world – with all major powers, with our extended neighbourhood and with our partners in the developing world and the Non-aligned Movement.

Recently in February, we signed a new India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty in place of the earlier one of 1949. The new Treaty updates the legal basis of our bilateral relations to reflect the contemporary reality. It would enable us to further strengthen and enhance our relationship to a higher level to meet the aspirations of our two peoples. We have reiterated our full support to the restoration of multi-party democracy in Nepal and the success of the peace process. As a friend and neighbour, India is interested in a democratic, stable and prosperous Bangladesh. We have conveyed at high political levels to Sri Lankan leaders the need for a negotiated, political settlement to the ethnic issue that is acceptable to all sections of Sri Lankan society. It is a matter of satisfaction that the dialogue process with Pakistan is progressing steadily. The Composite Dialogue, the Joint Commission and the Anti-terrorism Institutional Mechanism have provided a structural framework within which all major issues are being discussed. We remain concerned over infiltration and cross-border terrorism, and the success of the dialogue process is predicated on Pakistan fulfilling its commitment not to permit any territory under its control to be used to support terrorism in any manner.

In April this year, India will host the 14th SAARC Summit. As the SAARC Chair, India will work for ensuring that SAARC becomes a vehicle for peace and progress in our region. The people of South Asia have a shared heritage and a shared destiny. We are particularly happy that Afghanistan will join as SAARC's eighth Member at the forthcoming Summit. The importance of India-Afghanistan relations was underlined at the second Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan in November 2006 co-hosted by India and Afghanistan.

The transformation in the India - US bilateral relationship has resulted in wide-ranging engagement across many fields including Defence and security issues, counter-terrorism, science and technology, health, trade, space, energy - including nuclear energy, agriculture, maritime cooperation and environment. Members are aware of our efforts to arrive at an agreement with the US on civil nuclear energy cooperation within the parameters laid out in the July 18, 2005 India-US Joint Statement and the March 2, 2006 Separation Plan. India shares a strategic partnership with the European Union, which covers a wide range of areas including trade and investment, culture, science and technology. Negotiations are to be launched on a broad-based India-EU trade and investment agreement.

The recent landmark visit of President Putin as the Chief Guest at our Republic Day highlighted the broad-based cooperation that marks India's long-standing relationship with Russia. The development of the Brahmos missile through a joint venture between our countries demonstrates the mutual benefits of our cooperation. The agreements reached during the visit will significantly expand our cooperation in the fields of energy, high technology, Defence and space. The strategic partnership between India and Russia is poised to deepen even further.

The visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao to India in November 2006 strengthened the process of sustained and comprehensive development of India-China relations. The two countries agreed on a 10-pronged strategy to add greater content to our strategic partnership and to develop an action oriented agenda for the future.

India's "Look East Policy" has contributed to increasing engagement with ASEAN and our East Asian neighbourhood. India's participation in the East Asian and India-ASEAN Summits has rejuvenated our ancient links with the region and strengthened economic ties. Singapore, China, Japan, Korea and other countries have shown great interest in the "Nalanda Project" which seeks to create an Asian centre for inter-civilizational dialogue in India.

India's relations with Japan have entered a new era with the launch of a Global and Strategic Partnership last year. A Special Economic Partnership Initiative will promote investment, especially in infrastructure, power generation and setting up of an industrial corridor. Negotiations for a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement are underway. We look forward to the visit of Prime Minister Abe later this year.

At the Non-Aligned Summit last year, India worked with the other members to bring development to the center of the international agenda. My Government is actively pursuing strengthened relations with countries of West Asia and the Persian Gulf region. We would like to see durable peace and stability in the region. We have called on all parties in West Asia to renounce violence and seek a comprehensive solution through peaceful negotiations taking into account the legitimate interest of all concerned. My Government has also reiterated its desire to see a stable, peaceful, prosperous, united and democratic Iraq. The visits to India of the Emir of Kuwait and the King of Jordan following that of HM the King of Saudi Arabia last year, and the recent visit of the External Affairs Minister to Iran highlight the importance attached to our enduring interests in this region, vital for energy security and employment opportunities for Indians. India has also been working to further deepen and diversify its relations with countries in Africa and Latin America. India's relations with South Africa and Brazil received a fillip last year. The historic India-Brazil-South Africa Summit brought together the largest democracies of Asia, Africa and Latin America revitalizing our commitment to South-South cooperation. The Pan African e-Network which is being implemented with our support has provided a unique platform to promote high tech collaboration between Africa and India.

My Government has paid special attention to the protection and welfare of overseas Indian workers, especially those in West

Asia and the Gulf. We admire their spirit of enterprise and would like to see them more actively engaged in India's development. The Overseas Citizen of India Card scheme has addressed a long-standing demand of persons of Indian origin. We are now working on a proposal to establish a PIO University in India. My Government will take steps to encourage a "reverse brain drain" so that some of the brightest and talented children of India return to their Motherland.

India has welcomed the resumption of negotiations across all areas of the Doha Round in the World Trade Organization (WTO) with a view to reaching an early positive conclusion. In order to break the impasse, developed countries must make meaningful offers to reduce the large trade-distorting subsidies provided to their agriculture sector. At the same time, the role of agriculture as a major source of livelihood in developing countries makes it imperative that governments are enabled to mitigate risks associated with price declines, price volatility and predatory competition facing their low-income and vulnerable farmers through appropriate policy flexibilities. Equally important is increased market access for products and services of export interest to developing countries to ensure that the Doha Round is indeed a Development Round.

Honourable Members, our country is on the threshold of a new era of development. The sense of confidence of our working people, our professionals and entrepreneurs and their dynamism give us reasons to be hopeful. However, my Government recognizes that for development to be meaningful it must be inclusive. To this end, it is necessary to revitalise our rural economy and address issues of widening rural-urban disparities. The reform of Government, making it more transparent and responsive, and the elimination of the cancer of corruption are necessary elements of any strategy of inclusive growth. The Right to Information Act is one means of empowering our citizens. The more powerful instrument in their hands is their right to have their voice heard and their grievances redressed in these august premises of our Parliament. Eternal vigilance, as it has been said, is the price of democracy. You, Honourable Members, are here as the representatives of our people. It is incumbent upon you to ensure through the great institutions of our democracy that the people of our country are the recipients of better governance. I hope you will put to good use the power at your disposal in the interests of our people and our nation. I convey my best wishes for the purposeful conduct of the proceedings of Parliament this year.

Jai Hind!
