

12.00 hrs.

THE PRIME MINISTER (DR. MANMOHAN SINGH) : Madam Speaker, I join all other Members of this august House in conveying our very sincere thanks to the Respected Rashtrapatiji for a very thought-provoking Address. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Leader of the Opposition, Shri L. K. Advani, other senior Leaders including Shri Mulayam Singh Yadav, Shri Lalu Prasad and many other distinguished personalities who have spoken on the Address of the hon. President.

I sense an underlying sense of unity is what our Republic is about. What are the tasks that lie ahead and how we should go about in achieving those objectives? Shri Advani had said that we should all work to make the 21st Century the India's Century. This is an idea that I have been stating for quite some time. I said as early as 1991 quoting Victor Hugo : "That no power on earth can stop an idea whose time has come" and I sincerely believe that the emergence of India as a major power house of the global economy and global polity happens to be one such idea whose time has come. It is our privilege to contribute to the realisation of this cherished goal of our country.

The tone of speeches on all sides has been highly constructive, and I think this augurs well for our country starting with the unanimous election of hon. Speaker followed by unanimous election of hon. Deputy Speaker. We have made a new beginning. It is my hope and prayer that we maintain that spirit of bipartisanship when it comes to dealing with large number of National problems and concerns, which we face as a country.

Madam, the conduct of free and fair elections and the subsequent formation of the Government are indeed a triumph for Indian democracy. We can take legitimate pride in our achievements. There were many people who believed that Parliamentary democracy cannot succeed in a country as poor as India, and that Parliamentary democracy cannot succeed in a country where the voters are illiterate to such an extent as is the case with our country. We have seen people

writing about it. I recall that way back in the 1960s a correspondent of the *New York Times* Selig S. Harrison, who was based in India, went back and wrote a book, namely, India : “The Most Dangerous Decades”, predicting the demise of Indian Union by the end of the 1970s.

We have proved all these prophets of doom and gloom wrong, and our Republic has shown the resilience to march ahead.

Madam, I sincerely believe that social and economic transformation of India in the framework of a democratic polity, an open society committed to the rule of law, committed to respect for all fundamental human rights, is a development in world history which, if it succeeds, will have profound consequences for the processes of development in all countries of the third world.

People marvel at a country of a billion people characterized by vast diversity of languages spoken, characterized by diversity of religious beliefs and caste tensions, yet moving forward together. This is something which has earned our country deep admiration. At least, that is what I have sensed in my five years as Prime Minister as I travelled in various parts of the world.

It is our privilege and it is our bounden duty to strengthen the democratic foundations of our magnificent Republic.

There are tensions in the system, and while we congratulate ourselves, we must not lose sight of some manifest weaknesses – the growing use of money power, muscle power in elections. I think these are developments which need to be tackled, if we have to maintain the health of our democratic polity.

Also, if we have to succeed, it is necessary for us to take a firm pledge that we will not encourage groups and individuals who wish to divide our country on the basis of religion or caste.

We should deal firmly with people who believe violence is the only way to achieve their object. I believe we must all be solemnly committed to ensuring that social and economic development, which is a must for a poor country, must benefit all sections of society, all States of the Union, all communities and all persons.

I heard, Lalu ji refer to the special problems of Bihar. I assure him and I assure the hon. Members that the backward regions of our country, those which have been left behind in the race for development, will claim our priority attention as we deal with the challenges of development.

There is one thing more that I wish to say. Democracy is a beautiful tree, but all modern democracies, under the pressure of competitive politics, tend to adopt a short-term perspective; very often, longer term concern and issues do not get the attention that they deserve. We must have this long-term vision, if India is to realize its development objective. I sincerely hope that we will have that vision, that will and the courage to address some of these longer term concerns as a befitting tribute to the founding fathers of our Republic who gave us the magnificent Constitution of India.

Madam, the mandate that our Government has received, and we accepted in all humility, leaves no scope for bragging about. We recognise that this mandate casts a heavy responsibility on all of us to give our country a strong, purposeful Government, a stable Government, a Government committed to the pursuit of inclusive development process. As the President herself has acknowledged in her gracious Address, this is an agenda which will keep us all busy every day of the next five years. The mandate, therefore, is a mandate for stability, of change with continuity, commitment to inclusive growth, equitable development and commitment to the preservation and protection of a secular and plural India.

Madam, we will consolidate our efforts on each of these fronts and the President's speech has outlined the direction we intend to pursue. We will further strengthen our flagship programmes for employment, education, rural and agricultural development, health, and improve the delivery of public services through greater transparency and accountability. We are aware that though much ground has been covered, a lot more remains to be done. We will spare no effort in accelerating the speed of our work.

Madam, in this gigantic task I recognise that no development agenda can succeed if the Centre and the States, and now the third tier Panchayati Raj institutions, do not work in a spirit of collaboration, in a spirit of harmony. Madam, you have my assurance that in dealing with States, in dealing with Panchayati Raj institutions, we will operate strictly on the basis of objectivity. No discrimination will be done against any State which may not be governed by parties which are in power in Delhi. This is a commitment I give. I call upon all Chief Ministers to work together in the National Development Council to earnestly implement the vast development and inclusive development agenda that the President has placed before our people.

Madam, I should say a few words about the strategies and programmes that President in her speech has referred to. What is our fundamental task as a Government? I have always believed and here I draw inspiration from the founding fathers of our Republic Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlalji, Indiraji, Rajivji who have always emphasised that our freedom will be incomplete so long as there is mass poverty in our country.

It was the dream of the father of our nation, Mahatma Gandhi to wipe out tears from the eyes of each and every individual in our country. That is an ambition which we may not be able to fulfil but that is the inspiration which should and which will guide our Government in its quest for giving our people a life of dignity and self-respect.

Development is meaningless if our people suffer from ill-health, if our people are illiterate, if the environment protection measures are not in place, if the degradation of land and water resources of our country and the river resources of our country goes unchecked. Therefore, we commit ourselves to this inclusive vision for development where the fruits of development will be equitably shared, where all individuals in our magnificent Republic would get an equal chance to fulfil their ambitions. It is not easy but I am convinced that education, health and environment protection are the means through which we can help our people to improve the quality of their living. But all this requires resources and money does not grow on tree. If we have to invest in our flagship programmes, then we need lot more resources and expanding tool of resources. Fortunately, in the last five years, our economy managed to grow at the rate of 8.6 per cent. That benefited our revenues enormously. We were able to expand the resource flows for agriculture, for rural development, for education, for health and for environment protection.

More recently, particularly in the last one year because of the international slow down our economy has been affected. Our growth rate which was about 9 per cent, in the previous four years has declined to about 7 per cent. We live in an increasingly inter-dependent world economy and I cannot promise you that we will not be affected by global events but I am convinced since our savings rate is as high as 35 per cent, given the collective will, if all of us work together, we can achieve a growth rate of 8 to 9 per cent even if the world economy does not do well. This shows we will maintain, at least, 7 per cent growth rate. In the short run, we cannot do better but this is not good enough. Therefore, the ambition that our Government has is that notwithstanding developments in the global economy, our country must have the resilience to so manage its affairs that it grows at the annual rate of 8 to 9 per cent. I am convinced this can be done with the cooperation of all sections of this august House. That will be the direction in which we will be moving.

I recognise that fiscal system is under strain. The fiscal deficit has increased but I do believe that in the short run, even then we have manoeuvrability to spend more resource on our flagship programmes. I sincerely believe that hon. Finance Minister when he presents his Budget will unfold the Government's strategy in this regard.

But as I said, we cannot spend our way into prosperity. In the present situation there is considerable scope to increase public expenditure, particularly on infrastructure projects and that would not lead to inflation, that would only add to our development growth potential and I reckon that is the right way to deal with international slow down that has affected many countries in the world.

The world economy is inter-linked with the management of a vast country like India. There are international factors which affect us. There are also developments in security matters which also can derail the development process. If terrorism is uncontrolled, if Left Wing extremism continues to flourish in important parts of our country which have tremendous natural resources of minerals and other precious things, that will certainly affect the climate for investment. Therefore, as a Government we are committed to doing all that is in power to ensure that terrorist elements are brought under control. That is why the hon. President talked about 'Zero Tolerance' for terrorism. In the same way, in dealing with Left Wing extremism we have to convince our misguided youth that violence of the gun is no way of solving any problems and that our democratic polity gives them the scope through the ballot to express their concerns and we have seen in the past that rebels of yesterdays have ended up as being rulers. That is the beauty of our Republic; beauty of our democratic polity. So, we have to operate on two fronts in dealing with these extremist elements. We cannot allow violence to be used as an instrument of getting their results. At the same time we recognise that there is a climate in which violence flourishes and it should be our objective to ensure that people are not carried away by economic and social discontent to join the ranks of the affected people. That is why walking on two

legs and a firm resolve to see that law and order is maintained and simultaneously a firm commitment to ensure that the gains of development do reach to the disadvantaged sections of our society, particularly those living in the tribal areas is required.

I am conscious of the fact that the tribal population in our country has not got a fair deal. The way we administer the tribal areas; the way we send officers who are disinterested to work in these difficult tribal areas, the flow of resources is not properly monitored and there is no proper guidance in the spending of resources. I think, the whole development strategy for tribal areas in Central India at least requires a fresh look.

I promise that our Government will do all that is possible to bring the tribal communities of our country into the national mainstream. We have taken some steps in the last five years. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, which confers rights on forest dwellers, is a step in that direction. But I do recognise much more needs to be done on the economic and social fronts to contain the discontentment in the tribal areas which often leads to naxalism or left-wing extremism.

In his speech, the hon. Leader of the Opposition, Shri L.K. Advani, mentioned that the Centre has been blamed for certain lapses by the Commission of Inquiry set up by the Maharashtra Government in connection with the terrorist attack in Mumbai on November 26. As Members of Parliament are aware, the Government of Maharashtra had set up a Two-member Commission of Inquiry to inquire into the events of that day and the manner in which the State Government had responded to the attack. I understand that the Commission of Inquiry has submitted its Report to the State Government. The State Government would, no doubt, be tabling the Report in the Maharashtra Legislature, together possibly with an Action Taken Report. It is not possible, therefore, to comment at this stage on the contents of the Report of the Commission of Inquiry before the Report is formally tabled on the floor of the State Legislature. I shall, therefore, refrain

from commenting on the inferences drawn by the hon. Leader of the Opposition about a Report that is yet to be placed on the floor of the State Assembly.

I would, however, like to inform the House about the several steps that have been taken since November 2008 to further tighten the vigil against future terrorist attacks of this nature. As Members are aware, the perpetrators of the November 26 attack came by sea. We were all aware of our vulnerability to such attacks from this quarter and had already taken a number of steps, but obviously these were inadequate. A massive effort has hence been taken to streamline our maritime security which included the setting up of a Maritime Command under the Coast Guard with overall responsibility vested with our Navy.

We have increased the number of Marine Police Stations to supplement the efforts of the Coast Guard and the Navy. There have been several other steps that have been taken. But I shall enumerate only a few. Improvements in intelligence sharing is one. The Multi Agency Centre has been fully energised and Subsidiary Multi Agency Centres constituted in more States. The process will be completed shortly. The Net-Centric Information Command structure is being put in place to achieve online transfer of all actionable intelligence in a streamlined manner. Generation of actionable intelligence has simultaneously been given priority and measures put in place for this purpose. Technical innovation and technical support to intelligence production has been given the highest priority. Steps have also been taken to improve the quality of intelligence analysis. Investigation into serious terrorist offences will, from now on, be the responsibility of the newly-constituted National Investigation Agency.

Additional legal measures taken include - apart from the new NIA Act - significant amendments to the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. The Home Minister is in constant dialogue with Chief Ministers of States keeping them informed of the specific aspects of the two new pieces of legislation.

Madam, following the terrorist attacks in Mumbai on 26th November, 2008, the imperative necessity to have dedicated counter terrorist forces has been further

reinforced. The National Security Guard is the principal counter terrorist force in the country. A major effort has been made to improve its capability, improving better mobility and state-of-the-art equipment. At least, four new NSG hubs have been set up in different parts of the country. In addition, certain other dedicated counter terrorist forces are sought to be created.

Madam, it goes without saying that both the challenges of the troubled times that we live in terms of security of our nation and the unique opportunities within our reach for the well being of our people, enjoin us to work together for common goals. I am grateful to the hon. leaders of the Opposition who offered their support on both these counts. I consider it the duty of my Government to build further unity of purpose. I have always felt that our differences will melt away when we consider the overwhelming nature of the challenge that our country faces.

Madam, I would like to say a few words about our relations with our neighbours. We are living in a neighbourhood of great turbulence. I have believed India cannot realize its ambitions unless there is peace and prosperity in South Asia as a whole and if our neighbourhood is suffering from instability, turbulence that has direct bearing on our own evolution as a democratic polity committed to sustained growth and development. I have, therefore, a vision for a transformed South Asia where, with the cooperation of all our neighbours, we move from poverty to prosperity, from ignorance to knowledge society and from insecurity to lasting peace. What is at stake is the future of one-and-a-half billion people living in South Asia. I sincerely believe it is in our vital interest therefore to try again to make peace with Pakistan. I recognise, it takes two hands to clap. There are some disturbing trends, but I do hope that the Government of Pakistan will create an atmosphere in which we can realize this vision. I expect the Government of Pakistan to take strong, effective and sustained action to prevent the use of their territory for the commission of acts of terrorism in India, or against Indian interests, and use every means at their disposal to bring to justice those who

have committed these crimes in the past, including the attack on Mumbai. I believe that such actions will be welcomed by the peoples of both countries.

If the leaders of Pakistan have the courage, the determination and statesmanship to take this road to peace, I wish to assure them that we will meet them more than half way.

I should say a few words about Sri Lanka. We have centuries-old ties with the people of Sri Lanka and we have a deep and abiding interest in the well-being of the Tamil people in that country. The Tamil problem is larger than the LTTE and I sincerely hope that the Sri Lankan Government will show imagination and courage in meeting the legitimate concerns and aspirations of the Tamil people to live their lives as equal citizens and with dignity and self-respect. We have been taking an active part in the relief and rehabilitation of the Internally Displaced Persons in Sri Lanka and I have already earmarked Rs.500 crore for this purpose. We are willing to do more to restore normalcy and to return such people to their rightful homes and occupations.

In this House as well as in the other House, Members have expressed concerns about the developments in Australia. Madam, Australia has emerged as a major destination for Indian students. Like many other Members who have spoken in this House, I have been appalled by the senseless violence and crime, some of it racially motivated against our students in Australia. I propose to engage the authorities in Australia in a high level dialogue with a view to taking stock of the situation and to providing adequate security for Indian students.

Madam, I have already spoken to Prime Minister Rudd of Australia on this subject. He assured me that any racist attacks on Indian students would be strongly dealt with. He made a Statement in Parliament in which he condemned and deplored the attacks and said that they were unacceptable. He emphasised that Australia is a multi-cultural nation which respects and embraces diversity. He said that these would be countered with the full force of the law.

Madam, I do not wish to under-play the anxiety of the parents of our students, but I wish to request the media to be mindful of the fact that there are over 200,000 Australian citizens of Indian origin. We should be mindful of their interests and avoid willy-nilly creating a situation where these citizens of Australia of Indian origin become the targets of racist intolerance. India and Australia have very good relations and it has been our effort to widen and deepen these ties in the last five years.

Madam, I should say a few words about our relations with China. Hon. Members have raised the issue of our relations with China and I should say that China is our strategic partner. We have a multi-faceted relationship with China. There is enough space – I have said so often – for both China and India to develop and contribute to global peace, stability and prosperity. We do not see our relations with China in antagonistic terms. We have a large trading relationship, we consult each other on global issues, whether in the G-20 process on climate change or terrorism, and we share a common commitment to maintain peace and tranquillity on our border.

There are, of course, issues which are complex such as the boundary question. But we have agreed upon a mechanism to address this matter. We wish to build a strong and stable relationship with China. This is in the mutual interest of both our countries. I have been assured by the Chinese leadership – I have interacted with them extensively in the last five years – that they also subscribe to the views I have expressed just now. But whether it is China or any country, we will ensure the territorial integrity and unity of our country and protect the security in every manner necessary. The House should have no misgiving on that score.

Madam, the President's Address has covered a vast territory. I could not do justice to all the points that have been raised. But as I listened to the debate, I was struck by an underlying sense of unity on all sides that India should move forward as a united nation to achieve its coveted place in the comity of nations. That is the mandate, a mandate for change, a mandate for inclusive development, a mandate to strengthen the secular foundations of our magnificent republic. It is to these tasks that I commit our Government and I invite all hon. Members to join me in passing this Motion of Thanks unanimously.