

THE PRIME MINISTER (DR. MANMOHAN SINGH): Madam Speaker, I convey my warm congratulations to you, the Members of this august House and the people of India on this momentous occasion of the 60th Anniversary of the first Session of our Parliament.

Madam, the Lok Sabha is a true representation of the unique diversity and genius of the Indian people. Its Members have come from every region, community, religion and strata of society. Some of them have left their mark with their masterly rhetoric, others with their earthy wisdom. Whether from the Left or the Right, from the Government or Treasury Benches, this House has voiced the tribulations of ordinary Indians and provided succour to them by enacting laws that translated the social and economic ideals of our nation into practical reality. What the Constitution envisioned, Parliament translated into action.

Madam, as we look back over these years, we feel a sense of quiet satisfaction that this august institution representing the will of the sovereign people has indeed lived up to the ideals of the founding fathers of our Republic.

A number of countries in Asia, Africa and South America, who liberated themselves from the yoke of imperialism in the 1940s and 1950s, either succumbed to the scourge of military dictatorship or the tyranny of one party rule. India, on the other hand, has maintained an unbroken democratic tradition sanctified by 15 cycles of general elections and many scores of State and local body elections.

Madam, this august Chamber has scripted the development of our nation through debate and discourse tempered by the twin imperatives of idealism and pragmatism. The House has passed landmark legislation that have deepened the democratic roots of our polity and furthered our ideal of building a nation in which each citizen has an equal opportunity to social and economic fulfillment and cultural enlightenment.

In recent years, we have empowered our citizens by providing them the rights to information, education and minimum employment.  We have taken

affirmative measures to help the weaker sections of our society including the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, minorities and women. But I know, this is an unfinished agenda.

In times of calamity or crisis, our Parliament has always demonstrated the ability to reflect the collective resolve of our nation and show solidarity with the people and the Government. Be it the external aggressions of 1962, 1965, 1999 or the glorious moments of 1971, this institution surmounted political partisanship to reflect the common aspirations and sentiments of our people.

However, as we look ahead, this occasion should also become the moment for some candid and serious introspection. The manner in which we have conducted our affairs, especially over the past couple of years, has created a sense of frustration and disillusionment among the people. The daily routine of disruptions, adjournments and shouting in the House are leading many outside to question the efficacy of this institution and its place in public affairs.

If we are to restore the prestige of this institution, each and every one of us must lead by example. We need to resolve that the Rules of Procedure and Conduct that we have collectively evolved would be honoured in letter and spirit. Unless we can find some ways to resolve the growing impasse in the functioning of Parliament, public disenchantment will only grow. The leaders of political parties should sit together to find ways and means to raise issues, small or big, and air differences in a manner that does not stall Parliament at every occasion.

Madam, I believe that we should also reflect on how we should conduct the affairs of the State in which each of us plays a responsible role. Democracy is based on the notion of a popular mandate but it should not be construed as a populist mandate. I believe that a mature democracy is one that balances the daily pressures of politics against the long-term needs of development. These conflicting demands between the here and now of electoral politics, and the requirements of the long run that development imposes, can be and must be balanced.

We all have a sacred and solemn responsibility to the people who have elected us. But equally we bear a moral responsibility to do what is right by the generations still to come. We must therefore always keep in mind that our conduct and the actions we take here today will determine the state of the nation we will bequeath to our children and grandchildren.

In conclusion, Madam, I wish to say that I am optimistic that the innate wisdom of our people and the strength of our democratic institutions will guide us on the right path to building a secure and prosperous India.
