



PM inaugurates hospital in Dickoya, addresses Indian Origin Tamil community in Norwood

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The Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi today inaugurated a hospital in Dickoya in Central Province of Sri Lanka, built with Indian assistance. A large number of people lined the roadside, to welcome Prime Minister Modi, who later addressed a large gathering of Indian Origin Tamils at Norwood, in the presence of the Sri Lankan President, Sri Lankan Prime Minister, and a large number of community leaders. During the address, the Prime Minister spoke of the contributions of the Indian Origin Tamil community to Sri Lanka, and the long shared heritage between India and Sri Lanka.

The Prime Minister also met representatives of the Ceylon Workers Congress, and the Tamil Progressive Alliance.

Following are some key excerpts from the Prime Minister's address to an estimated audience of about 30,000 people, mostly Indian Origin Tamils in Central Sri Lanka:

It is a great pleasure to be here today.

And, I am most grateful for your warm and enthusiastic welcome.

It is a tremendous honour to be the first Indian Prime Minister ever to visit this beautiful region of Sri Lanka.

But, it is a greater honour to have the opportunity to speak with you.

People the world over are familiar with famous Ceylon Tea that originates in this fertile land.

What is less known is that it is your sweat and toil that makes the Ceylon Tea the brew of choice for millions around the globe.

If Sri Lanka today is the third largest exporter of tea, it is because of your hard work.

It is your labour of love which is instrumental in Sri Lanka meeting almost 17% of the world's demand for tea, and earning more than 1.5 billion US dollars in foreign exchange.

You are that indispensable backbone of the thriving Sri Lankan tea industry that justly prides itself on its success and global reach today.

Your contribution is deeply valued across Sri Lanka and beyond.

I for one truly appreciate your hard work.

You and I have something in common.

As some of you may have heard, I have a special association with tea.

Chai pe Charcha, or discussions over tea, is not just a slogan.

Rather, a mark of deep respect for the dignity and integrity of honest labour.

Today, we remember your forefathers.

Those men and women of strong will and courage, who undertook the journey of their life from India to then Ceylon.

Their journey may have been uphill and their struggles hard, but they never gave up.

Today, we remember and salute that spirit.

Your generation also faced relentless hardships.

You encountered the stiff challenge of making your own mark and identity in a newly independent nation.

But, you faced them boldly; you fought for your rights, but you did so peacefully.

We will never forget leaders like Saumiyamurthy Thondaman, who worked hard for your rights, for your upliftment and economic prosperity.

Kaniyan Pungunranar, a Tamil Scholar had declared more than two millennia ago, Yaathum Oore; Yavarum Kelir, meaning "Every town is hometown and all people are our kin".

And, you have captured the true spirit of that saying.

You have made Sri Lanka your home.

You are an intrinsic part of the warp and the weft of the social fabric of this beautiful nation.

You are the children of Tamil Thai.

You speak one of the oldest-surviving classical languages in the world.

It is a matter of pride that many of you also speak Sinhala.

And, language is much more than a tool for communication.

It defines a culture, forges relationships, joins communities and acts as a strong unifying force.

There is no better sight than a multilingual society living in peace and harmony.

Diversity calls for celebration; and not confrontation.

Our past has always been harmoniously inter-woven.

Several Buddhist texts including Jataka tales mention Saint Agastya, whom many consider to be the father of Tamil language.

The Sinhalese Nayak Kings of Kandy had matrimonial alliances with the Nayak Kings of Madurai and Tanjore.

Sinhala and Tamil were the court languages.

Hindu and Buddhist shrines were both respected and revered.

We need to strengthen, not separate, these threads of unity and harmony.

And, you are perhaps best placed to lead such efforts and make your contribution.

I come from the State of Gujarat in India, the birth place of Mahatma Gandhi.

Almost 90 years ago, he visited this beautiful part of Sri Lanka, including Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Matale, Badulla, Bandarawela and Hatton.

Gandhiji's first and only visit to Sri Lanka was about spreading the message of socio-economic development.

In commemoration of that historic visit, the Mahatma Gandhi International Centre was set up with Government of India assistance at Matale in 2015.

Another national icon of India from later years, Puratchi Thalaivar MGR was born on this very soil, establishing a life-long connection.

And, in more recent times, you have gifted to the world one of the finest spinners in cricket, Muthiah Muralitharan.

Your progress is our pride.

We take much joy from your accomplishments in various walks of life.

We rejoice in the success of the Indian-origin diaspora as they leave a mark across the world, near and far.

I look forward to many more shining successes.

You form an important link between Indian and Sri Lankan people and government.

We see you as part of seamless continuum of our ties with this beautiful country.

It is my Government's priority to nurture these links.

And, shape our partnership and engagement in a manner that ultimately contributes to the progress of all Indians and all Sri Lankans, and also touches your lives.

You have kept your bonds with India alive.

You have friends and relatives in India.

You celebrate Indian festivals as your own.

You have soaked our culture and made it your own.

India beats in your hearts.

And, I am here to tell you that India fully reciprocates the warmth of your sentiment.

We will continue to work tirelessly for your socio-economic upliftment in all possible ways.

I am aware that the Government of Sri Lanka is taking active steps to improve your living conditions, including a 5-year National Plan of Action.

India will fully support their efforts in this direction.

India has also undertaken many projects for your well-being, together with Sri Lankan Government, particularly in education, health and community development sectors.

The Ceylon Estate Workers Education Trust (CEWET) was set up way back in 1947 in order to encourage promising students to continue their studies.

Under this, we offer around 700 scholarships annually to students for studying in Sri Lanka and India.

Your children have benefited from this.

In the area of livelihood and capacity building, we have set up vocational training centres and 10 English language training centres and labs to help impart suitable skill sets.

Similarly, we have helped set up computer and science labs in plantation schools.

We are also upgrading a number of plantation schools.

Just a while ago, President Sirisena, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and I dedicated to the people a new 150-bed hospital complex in Dickoya, which has been constructed with Indian assistance.

Its state-of-the-art facilities will cater to the health care needs of the region.

I am also pleased to announce that we have decided to extend the 1990 Emergency Ambulance Service, currently in operation in Western and Southern Provinces, to all the other Provinces as well.

We are also happy to share with you India's holistic healthcare traditions such as Yoga and Ayurveda.

As we celebrate the International Day of Yoga next month, we look forward to your active participation in popularising its multiple benefits.

As part of the innovative Indian Housing Project in Sri Lanka, 4000 houses are being constructed in upcountry areas.

I am happy that for the first time, beneficiaries are also being given ownership of the land on which the houses are being built.

To continue our commitment in this area, I am delighted to announce the construction of an additional ten thousand houses in upcountry areas under this project.

Earlier today, I announced direct Air India flights from Colombo to Varanasi.

With this, you would be able to visit Varanasi with ease and seek the blessings of Lord Shiva.

The Government and people of India are with you in your journey towards peace and greater prosperity.

We will help you overcome the challenges of your past to realise the promise of your future.

As the great poet Thiruvalluvar said, "Wealth will find its own way to the man of unfailing energy and efforts".

I am confident that it will be a bright future that matches the dreams and potential of your children and your heritage.

Thank you, Nandri.

Thank you very much.

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