



Speech by the Hon'ble President of India Shri Ram Nath Kovind at the civic reception hosted in his honour

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1. Thank you for this warm welcome and this truly passionate reception in the city of Kolkata. This is my first visit to Bengal as President of India, and I am absolutely glad to be here – in this glorious state and this lovely city. In this **City with a Heart!**

2. I am not a stranger to Bengal. I have been visiting the state and I have been coming to Kolkata for decades now. I would say I have long been an admirer of Bengal and its culture and its history. In fact, there are few people anywhere in our country who have not been touched by Bengal or by some creation of Bengal. Somehow, in some manner, this state has touched every Indian and enriched the life of every Indian. Every Indian child has grown up on stories about Bengal or written in Bengal.

3. Bengal has been central to our national identity. Our national anthem, **Jana Gana Mana**, was written on the soil of Bengal by the Nobel Laureate Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. **Gurudev ke pronam korte jabo** Tomorrow morning, I plan to visit Jorasanko, Gurudev's ancestral home, to pay my heartfelt tributes.

4. Our national song, **Vande Mataram**, a rallying cry for our freedom fighters, was composed by Maharishi Bankim Chandra Chatterjee as early as the 19th century. And our beloved slogan **Jai Hind** was given to us by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, a great son of Bengal and a leader who is cherished, remembered and missed to this day in all parts of our country.

5. A few days ago, I had the honour of visiting the Indian National Army Memorial in Moirang in Manipur. This is where freedom fighters of the INA, inspired by Netaji, raised the national flag for the first time on Indian soil. It was a very moving moment for me.

6. These three – Gurudev Rabindranath, Maharishi Bankim and Netaji Subhas – were instrumental in defining our nationalism. Our freedom came faster because of the energy they gave our people.

7. During the course of my visit here I plan to visit Netaji Bhawan, where I understand there is a memorial and research centre dedicated to the life and work of Netaji.

8. I am also travelling to Belur to pay my respects to two other illustrious sons of Bengal who have contributed so much to our national life – Ramakrishna Paramhansa and his finest disciple, Swami Vivekananda. In their own manner, they rediscovered our ancient Indian ethos not only for us in India – but for the world. Swamiji was among our earliest modern cultural ambassadors. His work lives on through the Ramakrishna Mission. This institution has been instrumental in our nation building process.

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9. Our nation building owes so much to Bengal and the sacrifices and achievements of the people of this land. A galaxy of revolutionary heroes from Bengal helped us get Independence, each doing his or her little bit, quietly, without seeking any reward. Young Khudiram Bose went to the gallows with a smile and with the dream of a free India in his eyes. The elderly but determined Matangini Hazra was shot by the colonial police. She died with **Vande Mataram** on her lips and the hopes of our motherland in her heart.

10. The Bengal Famine of the 1940s was a man-made disaster inflicted on innocent people by a diabolical imperial government. It remains one of the greatest tragedies in human history. Bengal suffered that tragedy with fortitude. Every Indian felt Bengal's pain.

11. A quarter-century later, Bengal embraced refugees escaping from a brutal military crackdown in what was then East Pakistan. It generously shared whatever little it had with those who had run away from oppression, and had lost everything. We can never forget that. The world can never forget that. It is not for nothing that I called Kolkata a **City with a Heart**. And Bengalis a **People with a Heart!**

12. A people with a heart and a people with a mind, I should say. A number of our pioneering women leaders were from Bengal – perhaps the most famous of them being Sarojini Chattopadhyay, who became Sarojini Naidu after her marriage. So many of our foundational social reform movements began here – from the times of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and later Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who set up among the first institutions for women's education.

13. And in education, we cannot forget the contribution of that remarkable father and son, Ashutosh Mukherjee and Shyamaprasad Mukherjee. Or in the field of law, the humanism of that upholder of justice, the jurist Radha Binod Pal. He is still recalled with affection in Japan for his sympathy for ordinary men, women and children who had suffered the horrors of two nuclear bombs.

14. In recent times, another illustrious son of Bengal, Shri Pranab Mukherjee, served the nation at the highest level as President of India. We all refer to him affectionately as Pranab Da.

15. Tomorrow morning, I am visiting the Jagadish Chandra Bose Institute. It is celebrating its centenary and renewing the learning of the scientist-scholar it is named after. J.C Bose, S.N. Bose, Meghnad Saha – where would Indian science and technology be without Bengal? Where would our literature be without the novels of Sarat Chandra and the poetry of Nazrul? And where would our cinema be without the mastery of Satyajit Ray? **Aar Uttom Kumar ke kaeyu bhoolte pare ki?**

16. I have mentioned only a handful of the innumerable men and women of history and of stature that Bengal has produced. If I were to list all of them, I would be speaking for a few hours, and not a few minutes. So great is our Bengal's legacy.

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17. Bengal has a great history – but it is for each one of us to ensure that Bengal also has a great future. This state was an early industrial and manufacturing centre in our country. Its economy must sing again in this age of digital and robotic technologies. Its green fields and hard-working farmers must be equipped with the latest agricultural knowledge to allow them to realise their potential.

18. In 2022, India will be celebrating 75 years as a free country. This will be an occasion to reach certain developmental milestones for our people, and to create a better India. For this, we need to invoke the same idealism and fervour that contributed to our freedom movement. Bengal was one of the leaders of our freedom movement. It must lead this effort for a better India by 2022.

19. As you know the Government of India has embarked on an ambitious Act East Policy. This involves building connectivity projects and taking economic initiatives. These will be of mutual benefit to our eastern and Northeastern states as well as to neighbouring countries. The people of Bengal are crucial to this programme.

20. Being a border state gives Bengal certain advantages. It also gives it certain responsibilities. Forces of radicalism and extremism, some of them with cross-border linkages, seek to take advantage of our democratic spaces. We must guard against this.

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21. As I conclude, I must thank you again for this warm reception, which has really touched my heart. **Khushi bhalo laglo** I would like to thank the Chief Minister and government of Bengal – and most of all the people of Bengal – for this reception. I will always remember it with affection. In particular, I would like to

thank the children present here. They are the future of Bengal and of India. I wish them great success.

22. And I promise to come back again - to come back to Bengal and to come back to Kolkata, the city of **mishti**, **adda** and football.

23. Recently the Under-17 Football World Cup was played in our country. Kolkata hosted many of the matches, including the final. Some of you may have watched the matches in the stadium. You played perfect hosts. And you did all of us proud. Many congratulations.

24. May the success of the World Cup inspire your efforts in other directions as well!

Thank you

Jai Hind!

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