

My dear countrymen,

You just now heard the melodious band of our Armed Forces. I convey my greetings to all of you. We are celebrating the 54th anniversary of our Independence. Today, we pay our respectful homage to the martyrs of the Freedom Struggle. I would like to remember today all the great men and women of our Freedom Movement, especially Mahatma Gandhi and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. They inspire and illuminate our march in the new century.

On this occasion, I send my greetings to all the people of Indian origin living in different corners of the world.

This nation of 100 crore people, inheriting a five thousand year old civilization, is today scripting an illustrious chapter in its history.

Dear friends,

Remember the many hardships that we had to go through three years ago in the aftermath of the nuclear tests at Pokharan. Today, those difficulties are receding.

We faced those hardships for the sake of our national security, and we did so successfully. Today our relations with many important countries of the world have grown stronger and deeper. We are engaged in a Strategic Dialogue with them on a regular basis.

India's prestige has gone up globally.

Sisters and brothers,

We have always been strong votaries of world peace. For thousands of years, we have been chanting the mantra of peace. — Prithvii Shantih,

Antariksha Shantih, Vanaspatayah Shantih ♦ — praying for peace on earth, in outer space, and also peace for all the flora and fauna.

Naturally, we have always desired to have peaceful relations with all our neighbours. The entire world knows that India has left no stone unturned to improve her relations with Pakistan. These efforts have been continuing right from the days of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Many Agreements and Declarations were signed. But these have not helped to establish lasting peace.

I, too, attempted to make a new beginning. I went to Lahore for peace.

Yet, despite having signed the Lahore Declaration, Pakistan committed an armed aggression at Kargil. Our jawans, with their bravery and heroism, threw them out of our territory. I pay my tribute to all those soldiers who laid their lives in that conflict. I express my deep sympathies with their families on this occasion.

Despite Kargil and cross-border terrorism, we invited Pakistan's President General Pervez Musharraf for talks.

I told my guest in Agra: ~We have been fighting for 50 years. For how many years more, you intend to fight? This has helped neither Pakistan nor India. Because of the hostile relations, both our countries are spending a lot of their limited resources on wars and for preparing for wars, whereas we ought to be spending these scarce resources on the development of our two countries and to improve the lives of our peoples.~

I had also told him: ~If we have to fight, why don't we wage a war against poverty, against unemployment, against disease, and against underdevelopment.~

We know that the people of Pakistan yearn for peace with India.

We have to promote cooperation in trade, economics, and in other areas for mutual benefit. We have to encourage greater people-to-people contacts.

Unfortunately, President Musharraf had no interest in improving our relations in all possible areas. He came here with a single-point agenda — to make India accept Pakistan's terms on Kashmir.

I could not have accepted this condition.

He wanted us to forget the Shimla Agreement and the Lahore Declaration, and begin a new journey from Agra.

I could not have accepted this too.

He kept on describing cross-border terrorism as ~jihad~ and ~freedom struggle~.

There was simply no question of accepting this logic.

As we had expected, there has been a spurt in terrorist activities after the Agra Summit. There have been massacres of innocent people in Amarnath, Kishtwar, Doda, Jammu and yesterday near Ghaziabad.

What kind of jihad is this? What kind of freedom struggle is this? And, for whom is this freedom struggle?

The activities of Pakistan-supported Jehadi organizations are napak (unholy). They are against the tenets of Islam and humanism.

Let no one entertain any delusion that Pakistan can succeed in wresting Kashmir, through jihad and terrorism, what it has failed to get through

wars.

As far as the dialogue with Pakistan is concerned, India shall continue to be engaged in this process. Nevertheless, we shall not hesitate in the least to crush Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir.

Today I wish to tell the people of Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh that we feel your pain and agony. We have been making all efforts to remove it.

We shall intensify the efforts that we have been making to bring normalcy to the State and to bring the fruits of development to its people. Panchayat elections have been held in the State recently. The people of the Jammu and Kashmir will elect a new Assembly, after some time. We shall ensure free and fair elections to the State Assembly.

On this occasion, I recall the couplets of the great Shayar-e-Kashmir, Mehjoor. Its gist I would recall here:-

‘The caste and land of you Kashmiris is the same. Do not unnecessarily let anything create a distance between you. If Muslim is milk, Hindu is sugar. Mix this milk with this sugar’.

This Sufi ideology is the convergence point of Kashmir with the spiritual tradition of India. Kashmiriyat is a fine example of Sarva Dharma Samabhava (secularism). It completely negates the Two-Nation theory. We are indeed proud of this Kashmiriyat.

The situation in the North-Eastern States is a matter of special concern to us. Violence complicates problems; it does not solve them. It has created hurdles in the path of development of the North-East.

Today I would like to reassure my sisters and brothers in the North-East that the comprehensive peace process, that we have begun in the region,

will bear desired results.

India is a vast nation. It is multi-lingual and multi-religious. It is full of myriad diversities.

These diversities are not our weakness. Rather, they are our strength. They showcase our cultural richness. In these diversities lie the powerful threads of India's unity.

Sisters and brothers,

India is one of the ten fastest growing economies in the world. In terms of size, India is counted among the four largest economies of the world.

India has emerged as one of the front-ranking nations in the world in information technology, missile technology, and in many other areas.

When I see young women and men, of the new generation handling high responsibilities with aplomb, my faith in India's future gets strengthened. It is these people who are making India a better place than before. They are the architects of India's strong and glorious tomorrow.

Now we can truly take pride in being Indian. Indians can walk with their heads held high in the world.

In spite of the population having more than tripled in the past five decades, we have been able to reduce the percentage of people living below the poverty line.

In the decade of the '90s, it has fallen from 36 percent to 26 percent.

I do not claim that we have been able to eradicate poverty as rapidly as we should, or could, have.

But I am confident that abject poverty is on its way out in India.

In the last decade, literacy in India has taken a quantum jump. I am confident that in the current decade, India will more or less become completely literate.

It is true that India's economy is currently going through a slowdown. But this is a temporary phenomenon.

This is also a global phenomenon, and not limited to India alone.

But there is no need to get too worried on this score, because the fundamental indicators of India's economy are quite strong.

Prices are stable. Inflation is under control. Foreign exchange reserves are at a record high. And, our godowns are bursting with foodgrains.

Because of good monsoon, there are bright prospects of the coming crops on the economic front. Yesterday's heavy rainfall had cast doubts that the morning today will be full of dark clouds and the earth will be soaked with the rain showers. But, this did not happen. Clouds have dispersed and the sun has come out. We can now forge ahead towards future. Good monsoon has come with promising prospects on the economic front.

We have taken steps to increase investment in all the infrastructure areas, in industries, and in agriculture. We shall soon take more steps in this direction. These will help in bringing the economic slowdown to an end.

In the past few years, natural calamities seem to have resolved to test India. Orissa was hit by a super-cyclone. In Gujarat there was a devastating earthquake. Some parts of the country have faced severe floods, and at some places there is drought. Now, the task of their

rehabilitation is taking place on a large scale with the cooperation of all. We thank the foreign countries and are grateful to them for the speed with which they came forward with help. This symbolises that entire humanity is one and if any of its part is suffering, then the entire body feels the pain. All therefore should rush to extend help unitedly. Nevertheless, together we have encountered these crises with great fortitude and solidarity and provided relief to the affected.

We are going to put in place a permanent and institutional structure to effectively deal with such natural calamities.

My dear kisan brothers,

You are the country's annadata.

With your hard work, you have not only made India self-sufficient in foodgrains, but have produced a big surplus. Scarcity of foodgrains has become a thing of the past now. Earlier, we used to import food. Now, we are an exporter.

Today, the Government's godowns have a stock of more than 60 million tonnes of foodgrains. We are augmenting the storage capacity.

I am well aware of the many problems that our farmers are grappling with. We have been constantly trying to mitigate them. It has been our endeavour to ensure that the kisan gets fair and remunerative price for his crops.

So far, more than one and a half crore farmers have been given Kisan Credit Cards.

Some people have been expressing apprehensions that cheap farm imports will flood Indian markets because of our commitments to the WTO.

These have been proved false.

We are quite capable, depending on our needs, to impose or hike import duties and to check unfair imports. We have, in fact, done so in some cases.

It is true that a new scenario of world trade is emerging. This has presented many challenges to Indian agriculture and to the rest of our economy. We can — and we shall — face these challenges through collective and coordinated action.

I appeal to all our farmers, workers, managers, businessmen, scientists and researchers to prepare our economy to face global competition more vigorously. For this, our agriculture and industries have to constantly improve their quality. They also have to significantly reduce their production costs.

Friends,

This year marks the decade of India's New Economic Policy.

This policy has brought many gains to our economy. At the same time, however, several new problems have also cropped up.

It is true that certain recent developments have highlighted some of the weaknesses in our financial and capital markets. This has made people feel rather worried.

We have taken several steps to remove these weaknesses, and we shall take more steps in the future.

The functioning of the stock markets and financial institutions will be reformed to protect the interests of small investors.



Profits earned by hook or by crook cannot be the sole criterion for judging the success of a business. The success of liberalization requires the steady development of a new corporate ethic.

Brothers and sisters,

Some cases of corruption and scandals have surfaced in recent times. We cannot turn a blind eye to corruption, nor can we let corruption proliferate. A corrupt man must receive punishment for his deeds.

I reassure you that corrupt elements will not be able to escape the long arm of the law, irrespective of how high a chair they may occupy. Only yesterday, a new Bill – Lok Pal Bill has been introduced in the Lok Sabha. The Prime Minister has also been included in its ambit, if there are any corruption charges against him. Our Government will not discriminate in any way in this regard and will not hesitate, if need be, in putting to trial any person, however big or powerful he may be. We have already taken strong action in several cases.

At the same time, I wish to state that there is a need to refrain from giving baseless allegations the color of a scandal. I know that most people in our country believe in earning their livelihood by honest means.

Dear Countrymen,

This year marks a decade of New Economic Policy of India. There is no doubt that economic liberalization has benefited India. At the same time, this too is true that the fruits of liberalization have not adequately reached the poor and people living in rural areas. Inequalities have increased.

Therefore, after serious introspection, my Government has decided to give a new pro-poor, pro-village, and pro-employment orientation to our

economic policy.

We shall make necessary modifications in the policy to remove regional imbalances and social inequalities.

We are determined to ensure that the new economic policy becomes a promoter of social justice and that its benefits reach our brothers and sisters belonging to Dalit, Adivasi, backward, and most backward sections of our society.

We have unveiled several important schemes towards this end in the past three years. In the same direction, we now propose to take some new measures: -

The Central Government will launch an ambitious new scheme of Rs. 10,000 crore to provide additional and guaranteed employment in rural areas. This centrally sponsored scheme will be called the Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana.

Under this scheme, those who take employment from panchayats to build durable rural assets will be paid wages in cash and in foodgrains. For this, 50 lakh tonnes of foodgrains worth Rs. 5,000 crore will be provided to State Governments every year. All the existing employment schemes of the Central Government will be merged into this mega-scheme. Nearly one hundred crore mandays of employment are expected to be generated through the Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana.

Our economy shows a strange paradox. Nearly all the savings of our people are deposited in banks. The banks are unable to use these funds fully for developmental projects.

On the other hand, the unorganized sector of the economy does not get adequate bank credit. This sector constitutes two-thirds of our economy. The loan repayment record of this sector is indeed better than that of big

industries. We are considering some institutional measures to make resources available to the unorganized businesses and industries.

Neither faster development, nor people's participation is possible without decentralization. Which is why, two important amendments to the Constitution were enacted nearly ten years ago to empower the Panchayati Raj Institutions. However, we have so far not been able to devolve the necessary powers to the Panchayati Raj Institutions to empower them financially and administratively in an adequate manner.

The Government will soon initiate a national debate to achieve this important objective, involving all the over thirty lakh elected representatives in Panchayati Raj institutions. We would like the Panchayats to fix their own priorities, prepare their own plans, and to implement them with the participation of the villagers. Towards this end, we shall devise new ways to enable Panchayati Raj institutions and non-governmental organizations engaged in rural developmental activities to avail loans from banks and other financial institutions for specific development projects.

All of us know that democracy and hunger cannot go together. We shall therefore launch a National Nutrition Mission. Under this, subsidized foodgrains will be made available to adolescent girls and expectant and nursing mothers, belonging to below-poverty-line families. Cheaper foodgrains could also be provided to such religious, social, and educational organizations if they so require, that are engaged in mass-feeding programmes for the poor.

Friends, India is urbanizing rapidly. As a result, there is a growing shortage of affordable housing for the urban poor. The Government has, therefore, decided to launch Ambedkar – Valmiki Malin Basti Awas Yojana, to benefit especially those belonging to the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, backward classes, and other weaker sections. The Ministry of Urban Development will give a yearly grant of Rs. 1,000 crore to this project. HUDCO, which will implement this scheme, will make available another Rs.

2,000 crore as a loan amount.

There is a shortage of three lakh housing units for the families of the jawans in our Armed Forces. At the present rate of housing construction, it will take thirty years for this shortage to end. We have decided to build these three lakh housing units in the next four years.

I had mentioned, in my Address to the Nation on Independence Day last year, about the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Sadak Yojana. This is now being implemented in almost all the States. So far, the Centre has made Rs. 5,000 crore available for this project. This project would need Rs. 60,000 crore for completion. It is our aim to provide all-weather road connectivity to all villages and hamlets in the country, with a population of more than five hundred, by the end of the Tenth Five Year Plan in 2007.

The National Highways Development Project of Rs. 55,000 crore is one of the ambitious projects of independent India. We shall further intensify the work on this project. I am confident that these two major road connectivity programmes would create lakhs of new employment opportunities and also give our economy a big boost.

Our objective is Freedom from Distance. We are, therefore, determined to link all the villages of India not only with good roads, but also with good telecom and Internet services. A lot of progress has taken place in this regard in the past two years. We shall further accelerate this work.

Small and cottage industries are a big source of employment. The Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) alone provides employment to more than sixty lakh people under its various units. It has added six lakh new employment opportunities during the past three years. We shall take many new measures to strengthen the KVIC. We have also launched effective steps to popularize khadi and village industry products in foreign markets.

Tourism is a big source of employment generation and foreign exchange

earning. Indeed, it is the fastest growing industry in the world today. To achieve this end, we shall unveil a progressive National Tourism Policy before the end of this year.

Friends, our entire society, and especially poor people are fed up with the long delays and other deficiencies in our judicial system. The Government has set up over 1,700 Fast-Track Courts to reduce the mountain of long pending cases.

We shall soon take necessary steps to repeal or amend all laws and rules, which hurt the interests of the poor. We shall also review all those procedures and practices, which unfortunately have tended to make the poor targets of harassment by agencies of the Government

The Government is committed to the goal of ~Health For All~. After the unprecedented success of the polio vaccination campaign, the Government has decided to soon start similar mass campaigns against leprosy, tuberculosis, malaria, HIV/AIDS, and other such diseases.

In recent years, there has been a great interest, both in India and abroad, in Ayurveda and other Indian systems of medicine. We are considering making available a low-cost kit containing certain traditional medicines and herbal products, which have proved their efficacy over centuries in treating many common ailments. I urge our kisans and pharmaceutical companies to seize this new opportunity created by the growing worldwide attraction for Ayurvedic products and Indian systems of medicine.

We are observing this year as Women's Empowerment Year. Therefore, we shall impart greater momentum to the implementation of all the programmes aimed at the welfare of our mothers, sisters, and girls. I especially wish to congratulate the Self Help Groups started by women, which have begun a silent socio-economic revolution. There are many success stories in India, and also in the South Asian region, where Self Help Groups using micro-credit from banks have made a significant dent in rural and urban poverty.

Therefore, the Government has decided to facilitate the setting up of at least one self-help group in each of the 14 lakh habitations in the country, by the end of 2004.

We have taken yet another major decision for women's economic empowerment. Over the next three years, all public-sector banks will lend five percent of the net bank credit to women entrepreneurs. This will make Rs. 17,000 crore of bank credit available for women-sponsored businesses.

While launching these new initiatives, we are acutely aware of one fact. Usually, the Government prepares schemes and programmes but finds that the system is inadequate to the task of implementing them in an effective and time-bound manner.

The Government has, therefore, decided to observe the coming year as the Year of Implementation.

Towards this end, we shall constitute a Rapid Action Force to monitor the implementation of various poverty-alleviation and employment generation programmes.

Children are the most precious wealth of our nation. Ten years ago, representing India in the World Conference for Children, I had argued for greater investments for all-round development of children. However, the agencies of the Government alone cannot achieve this. I earnestly appeal to all voluntary organizations, businesses, and common citizens to ensure that we together enable every child in India to develop to their fullest potential.

Next month, there is a special session of the United Nations General Assembly on children. India will reiterate her commitment to children's welfare at this important forum.

Friends,

There is political stability in the country. There is a thriving democracy. In a big country like ours, there are bound to be small and not-so-small problems. Political opposition is natural in a democracy, but there should be no opposition for the sake of opposition.

There is full freedom in our country for political parties, intellectuals, and the media to express their views. This is, indeed, a matter of pride for us. It is only such freedom that nurtures and strengthens the roots of democracy.

However, freedom comes with responsibility. Our democracy demands of all of us that we discharge our responsibilities conscientiously, and that we respect proper norms.

Brothers and sisters,

We are all citizens of an India that is on her way to attaining greatness. We should have confidence in India's future. We should have faith in ourselves. We should have trust in our own hands and in our own brains. Trust is a resource. It has been my endeavour and the endeavour of my Government that we nurture mutual trust. Trust should not be broken. Nobody should come in the way of building mutual trust.

It is only on the strength of mutual trust, cooperation, and coexistence that we can create a future of hope for India.

Come, let us together resolve today to build a united, strong, prosperous and a caring India.

Jai Hind!

Jai Hind!

Jai Hind!