

I offer my hearty greetings to you on the auspicious occasion of the forty-fourth anniversary of the Independence Day of our country. It is a tribute to democracy that an ordinary worker like me, born in a small village, is able to address you from the ramparts of this historic Red Fort. It is due to your blessings and my good fortune.

You are aware that numerous people made sacrifices for this freedom and nurtured it with their blood. The great chariot of democracy has been moving forward steadily and shall keep going ahead.

During the last 44 years, elections were held for the Lok Sabha ten times. The Tenth General Elections were held only recently. During these elections, your anger as well as your appreciation have found expression. We have accepted with humility the mandate given by you. We belong to you, we are from amongst you and will continue to be a part of you. These are our credentials, and we do not need any other identity.

The elections for Tenth Lok Sabha were held in the shadow of a tragedy. Rajiv Gandhi's brutal assassination had stunned the country. The sudden disappearance of a young man, who was perceived to have solved the problem of leadership of our country for the next 20 to 25 years, plunged us all into darkness. But what can be done? We know that everyone who is born is destined to die one day. If death occurs after a full life, we accept it, but an untimely death causes distress. We will implement the agenda that Rajivji had prepared for the future of the country. And I stand before you with the resolve to follow the path shown by him.

I want to apprise you of the critical phase that the country is passing through today. This Government has completed 55 days in office. During this period we have taken certain decisions and avoided certain pitfalls. The people gave us the mandate to form the Government but it was short of the necessary majority. We accepted the mandate of the people and formed the Government. We will not spare any effort to ensure that the country marches ahead towards progress. The co-operation extended to us by other political parties has made the situation optimistic. It is my first belief that there is no reason to entertain any doubt about the stability of

this Government.

Very briefly I want to place before you the situation inherited by this Government. We inherited a situation which was vitiated by fundamentalism, hatred among castes and social unrest.

The economy was in the grip of a serious crisis that was unprecedented in the history of free India. Our financial credibility had touched the nadir. In a week or two, we would have been unable to repay our loans. I assumed the office in such a situation. Many of the problems were there for a long time, but during the last two years they grew in their complexity. This was part of our legacy. Things appeared to go out of hand. There was no scope for delay, and procrastination would have been suicidal. Therefore, we had to undertake certain prompt measures. We took bold decisions. We have been able to arrest the deterioration which was creeping in. A lot more has got to be done, but certainly we have arrested the situation from deteriorating further.

You are all aware that we produce so many things in the country for our requirements. But there are some items that we still have to import. There are some commodities which we produce, but the quality we produce is not enough to meet our needs. Therefore, we have to import commodities like kerosene oil, diesel, edible oil, fertilizers, etc. To import these we need foreign exchange as the Rupee is not convertible abroad. Our foreign exchange reserves have been woefully depleted. Even today we are not in a comfortable position and therefore we will have to boost our exports. The goods that we produce will be exported and we will get foreign exchange in return. Therefore, first of all, we have done away with the system of licences, permits etc. as this complex system created many obstacles for the people. Now we have broken this vicious circle, and liberated those who were stuck in it.

We have paved the way for increasing our exports by slightly changing the exchange rate of the Rupee. We trust that in the coming days our exports would get a boost and we would be able to earn enough foreign exchange. We have presented our new budget in which we have

formulated a number of schemes for public welfare, especially keeping in view the needs of our population.

I want to give a brief account of some of these programmes. We have done a lot but I would like to discuss a few of them as there is not enough time for a detailed presentation. As you know, we have prepared an extensive programme in the memory of Rajivji *which aims at* providing drinking water to every village in the country. You know that drinking water has been provided to a number of villages during the last forty years. Yet there are a few far-flung villages where there is a scarcity of drinking water. Therefore we are taking up 80,000 such villages in which drinking water will be made available under the programme named after Rajivji.

We have to improve the lot of our backward classes. To help them we are setting up a corporation.

We know that occasionally communal riots occur in our country. In these riots many people get killed, some become crippled and many children are rendered orphans with none to look after them. For these children we have set up a National Fund. This fund would be utilised to educate and bring up such children so that they get all opportunities to grow as worthy citizens of this country.

In our country, at times, the workers lose their jobs. Once they become jobless, none cares for them. We have formulated a plan to help them and rehabilitate them in alternative vocations by giving them training so that they do not become unemployed.

You know that our villages have got gifted craftsmen. They are second to none in their skills but their tools are outmoded. There are nearly 5.5 lakh villages in this country. Now, you can imagine how many craftsmen are there in every village working with outmoded tools. We have prepared a scheme to provide modern tools for all such craftsmen so that they do not migrate from villages to cities. By using better tools they can earn much more in the villages. Such migration creates problems in the cities. Therefore, once better tools are made available to them the craftsmen will have no compulsion to rush to cities and they can enhance

their income by remaining in the villages.

The most important thing is our Public Distribution System under which we have fair price shops, which are now largely concentrated in cities. The Public Distribution System has not yet reached the villages. We have decided to take up 1500 blocks in far-flung tribal, desert and very backward areas to provide at least one fair price shop in each village. In these shops people can get the commodities of their daily consumption at a reasonable rate. This would be a big boon for the people living in our villages.

You must also be aware that there are frequent land disputes and often they assume such violent proportions that the real issues are pushed into the background. And a lot of litigation continues for years, ruining the people. The source of these conflicts are the land records which are not kept properly. The only method to avoid this is to keep our land records in the villages properly so that people know about their ownership and proprietary rights. We want to launch this campaign throughout the country so that in every village proper land records are made available.

Rajivji had given us Indira Mahila Yojana but during the last two years, there has been no implementation of this scheme. We will revive and implement it. You know that the Panchayati Raj Bill was not allowed to take the shape of law. We will now have it passed and implement it.

I want to impress upon our non-resident Indian brothers that we want to welcome them here. We want to offer them many facilities here. We are ready to offer whatever facilities they require for making investments and set up industries. We want to strengthen the age-old bonds. We are proud of them. Lakhs of Indians have gone abroad. They have become prosperous. Even today they are determined to serve their country. Once again I extend to them a very cordial welcome.

Now I want to speak to you about certain burning problems before the country. As I mentioned earlier, the feeling of hatred is rampant. There is a spate of violence. We have to change this in this country, which is the abode of non-violence. There is no place for violence here. India, which

believes in world peace, will have no right to talk about it, unless there is peace in the country.

There are then the problems of Punjab and Kashmir. In these states violence, separatism and terrorism are prevalent. I want to make it clear that none is going to gain out of terrorism. The only result is bloodshed and loss of lives. Those who are indulging in such activities will never be able to achieve their aims. We should return to the path of peace and I appeal to them that they should co-operate with us in evolving a solution to the problems of this country, problems of Punjab and problems of Kashmir. Together we can find the solutions. There is no problem which is insurmountable.

We surely want elections in Punjab, but we would not tolerate the use of elections to promote separatism. We will ensure that elections are held within the parameters of the Constitution.

About Kashmir, I want to assert we are confident of facing the situation there. We will contain terrorism. As far as Kashmir is concerned there is the Shimla Agreement between India and Pakistan, and we will try to resolve the problems according to that agreement. This has been our endeavour so far and the same holds good for the future. We do not require any mediation. We are neighbouring countries and we will solve our problems between ourselves. All the problems can be solved, if there is understanding on the other side and if the activities of abetting and aiding violence are stopped from that side.

During the last two or three years a strange dispute has cropped up over the mosque and the temple. The foundation of our country is secularism. It is neither anti-religion nor fanning communalism in the name of religion. We wish to remain secular. Religion is a personal affair. The Government, its policies and programmes have got nothing to do whether someone visits the temple or someone else goes to the mosque. We are not going to give up secularism. We may need the help of others for running the Government, but we cannot take this country ahead if we give up the basic principles. This country will disintegrate the day we give up

secularism. Therefore, we must stick to it. Religion binds people. It generates spiritual thinking and improves our material and spiritual well being. The use of religion in politics to secure votes in elections is certainly not desirable. I hope people will understand this and will not allow such designs to succeed.

By secularism we also believe that minorities should be given full protection and therefore we are going to give legal status to the Minorities Commission. There is no danger to any religion here. I must say that the slogans about this or that religion being in danger are absolutely bogus. In this country there has never been any threat to any religion nor will there ever be. We want to guarantee this. It is the firm resolve of this Government that there should be no threat to any religion; and if a threat was ever there, we would eliminate it. This danger will never be there. We have to guard against such slogans.

We then have the issue of Mandal Commission which relates to our people belonging to the backward castes and backward classes. We certainly want social justice. We have undertaken several programmes to achieve this. In many States these programmes are continuing but we do not want social disintegration to attain social justice. We do not want the achievement of social justice by violence or by creating mutual confrontation. This cannot happen. It would lead to many other afflictions. We have faith that we can solve this problem peacefully and by consensus. I have discussed this with many people. I feel that on this issue, there is consensus to a large extent. Though the process is not yet complete, a broad consensus can be arrived at. I wish that this issue be resolved on the basis of a national consensus. Our efforts in this direction will continue.

Our farmers give us food and for them an extensive programme is before us. The farmers produce foodgrains but the production of several commodities will have to be stepped up so that we can export them to earn foreign exchange. I invite our farmers who have provided food for us to come forward now to produce for export and make this country prosperous.

I would like to tell our armed forces that the Government is always

alive to their interests and their welfare and there are several schemes before us. For want of time I cannot outline them but I want to assure them that we are preparing many schemes for them and we shall always be ready to look after their interests.

Friends, today the main problem before the country is economic. We have to increase our production as well as the wealth of this country. If wealth does not increase there will be nothing to distribute and it is not prudent to distribute poverty. Therefore, the need of the hour is that we should add to our wealth and ensure its just distribution. For this we have formulated a programme and the Government is keeping both these aspects in view. We have to generate employment and for increasing employment opportunities industrialisation is needed. The industry cannot remain outdated. A new environment has got to be created. We are engaged in this. If the capacity of industry does not develop, it will lag behind and we shall not be able to compete in the world market. Therefore, the capacity of the industry has got to be developed.

Besides tackling the economic issue, we must also ensure that there is no disintegration. Social unrest should not be there and people should not waste their energy and time fighting each other. I want to impress upon you that this has got to be stopped at any cost. Social unity and national unity are not separate from each other. Both are two sides of the same coin and therefore we have to take care of them.

I think that it is our foremost duty to uphold national unity, social unity and maintain social equilibrium so that there is no setback to social harmony. To achieve this we will continue to make all out efforts and, as I have said, this is the duty of all of us and we should perform this sincerely.

There are many things that I wanted to discuss with you but there is not enough time. But I will keep in touch with you and inform you about the various programmes and the steps that we propose to take from time to time. Today I would only like to say that the country is at a very precarious juncture and there are many dangers, both internal and external, looming large on the horizon. To face them we need unity. Once again I offer my

greetings to you on this auspicious occasion. I offer my best wishes for a very happy year of India's Independence to all of you. May this country scale new heights of progress in the coming year. I am grateful to all of you for giving me a patient hearing and I hope that you will fulfil your duties and will help the Government in performing its duties. You and me are not separate. We have to work together. Let us march ahead hand in hand.