

The month of August has a great significance in the life of our nation. Every year we meet here not merely to see each other but to salute our flag which is a symbol of our independence. It is also a symbol of our heroes who laid down their lives for independence and of those who are willing to sacrifice their lives even today.

Many of you who have assembled here and millions of others in their homes, fields and factories today want to know how far the country has moved towards its goal and how far from it it still remains. Truly speaking, the journey of a country never ends. However fast and long we may move, the distance always remains to be covered.

Many significant things have happened in our country during the last year. First of all, I must thank you for proving wrong what many of us here and abroad were saying about India and its people. In the biggest election ever held anywhere you have shown that the people of this country are fully aware of their rights and their duties. Despite many a difficulty, you did not desist from exercising your vote even at places where there was risk to life. You did not vote for a person or even for a party but you voted for the progressive programmes and policies which had been put by us before you.

Since then, as you know, we have been trying to do things and have taken some preliminary steps towards achieving those objectives which we had placed before you. Poverty is a terrible condition which brings frustration to the people and weakens the country. Therefore, our first task is to remove poverty. We have to remove social and economic disparities to achieve our objectives. As you are aware, we have taken some significant steps in that direction and are striving to remove obstacles in our way.

In the last session of Parliament we passed a Bill for amending the Constitution. This disturbed some people. There was some misleading propaganda to the effect that the land and other properties of the people would be taken away. Some members of the minority communities felt that their rights might be affected. I have said it before and I wish to reiterate my

assurance here today once again that we will not take away anything from anyone. We only wish that the benefits of affluence which some of us enjoy should also accrue to those who have nothing so that the strength of the nation grows. There is already a ceiling on land which varies from State to State. We hope this problem will be reviewed and appropriate action taken to give relief to our landless farmers and other weaker sections of the rural community so that they too can play a useful role in the life of the community. They have to be partners in our efforts to improve life in our villages. There is also a proposal to put a ceiling on urban property. We are, therefore, determined to implement our programmes one after the other. Some of these programmes have already been implemented, while others are still to be implemented.

After the General Election, when your representatives assembled here in Delhi, you had, like us, very high hopes. We thought that we would be able to make progress rapidly. However, suddenly and for no fault of ours, we were burdened with a problem which we had never imagined. But you know that the people of India have been able to carry many burdens and will continue to do so in future as well. We know that the inner strength that our citizens have, whether they are soldiers or civilians, old or young, will enable us to surmount all the difficulties that may come in our way.

I do know that quite a few things have happened that have disturbed you. At the same time many things have happened that have strengthened our hopes. The brave manner in which our people faced many difficulties, carrying various burdens and coming to each other's help, is a matter of pride for all of us. We, as citizens of India, have to see that we defend not only our own rights but also the rights of those who are unable to raise their voice. This, obviously, is not a Government responsibility but a responsibility of every citizen. As you know, we still suffer from the age-old disparities and inequalities. These disparities give us a bad name and weaken the country.

The removal of economic disparities is, of course, the responsibility of the State but it is the people who have to remove social inequalities. The

great responsibility of uniting India and strengthening it lies with the people.

Another problem which we, and particularly my sisters, face today is of rising prices. The price spiral affects all of us and it should be our endeavour that the prices of essential commodities remain at reasonable level. Why do prices rise? Sometimes, when a commodity is in short supply, there is a rise in its price and one can understand it. But many times when a particular item is taxed, other items which are in no way related to it also register rise in prices. Who raises these prices and why? Obviously, they are the unscrupulous dealers. You have to be alert and organise yourself to see that this does not happen in your locality. You must realise your responsibility as citizens whether it be about price rise or any other matter.

As you all know, India has faced many challenges. But the challenge that confronts us today is such as has never been faced by any country in the world. All these years while we had been striving to give our people their rights, things had been going on just the other way across our borders. Elections were held there just as elections were held in our country. As in India people there too came out in large numbers to vote but whereas we have been trying to fulfil our promises, a great tragedy has happened there. As a result of the atrocities inflicted on them over 7.5 million people, many of them wounded, sick and starved, had to leave their homes and take shelter in India. We have always kept our doors open for refugees. But they are not merely refugees; they are partners in a movement which is very significant. It is a movement similar to the one we had in our own country, and also in many other countries to secure the rights of the people. We cannot overlook the heavy price these people from Bangladesh are paying for the freedom of their country.

We have thus to keep the wider issues in view and surmount all the difficulties that may come in our way. We cannot overlook the bigger issues just because there are some difficulties. We have to face these difficulties and do our utmost to overcome them. We must also be aware of the factors on account of which we in this country have adhered to the principles of

democracy and to our constitution and have been trying to give concrete shape to them for the good of our people at a time when nations around us have bid goodbye to democracy and constitutions. We must continue to maintain our traditional values. We have to safeguard our freedom and democracy and make them really meaningful for our people.

As you know, it has always been our policy to carry our people with us. Our foreign policy has always been of seeking peace and friendship. We hate war and do not indulge in sabre-rattling. We do not raise slogans which can hurt others. It is because we know that the real strength lies not in words but in our strengthening the country both economically and politically. This is how we look at things. We do not threaten anyone nor are we scared by anyone's threats. We are confident that India can and will face any emergency with courage and determination.

You are aware that there have been floods in some parts of the country and severe drought in some others so that even drinking water is not available at some places. Despite all this, enough food has been produced in the country. There is some shortage of pulses and oilseeds. On the whole, there is no shortage of foodgrains. But we have to feed not only our own people. Just now, we are also feeding a large number of people from another land.

Every lover of freedom and of humanity is bound to raise his voice against events in Bangladesh, India has to see whether the steps that she takes or the slogans that are raised here strengthen the people of that country. I assure you that India and her people will always support the cause of freedom everywhere. The people of Bangladesh have our full support. This is time for us not to feel disheartened, however great the crisis. There never was any reason for feeling disappointed. We have proved that we have faith and self-confidence and that we can stand up to any crisis, and make whatever sacrifices are necessary. There is no reason for us to doubt that we have a bright future.

As we see today, a wave of change is sweeping this country and also other countries. No one can remain unaffected by this new wave of change.

This wave will engulf all of us. However, we do not have to fear it because we are swimming with the current. In fact, we are giving a direction to this current and we know that we are ready to face whatever the future may bring us.

On this auspicious day our fullest sympathies are with those who have to undergo suffering either because of floods or drought or poverty or any other kind of injustice. I say to them: Be courageous and lend us your hand. We will do everything to help them and take our beloved India forward. For all of us this is the time to be ready to face whatever difficulties, sufferings and dangers there may be.

The people of India may be poor or illiterate. But this has been a land of heroes and such has been its history. There is no reason for us to fear or to withdraw from the path we have chosen. Only one thing we have to keep in mind—that we adhere firmly to our traditional policy of secularism.

Recently, we entered into a treaty with the Soviet Union. Some people think that as a result of this treaty there has been a change in our policy. I can assure you that there has been no change in our policy because it is the right policy. It is not as though we cannot ever change our policy. But the policy we have so far followed is the one most suited to conditions that have so far existed and is based on principles that we value most. Today we see that many countries, whether they admit it or not, are inclined towards this policy. In fact, for countries like India no other policy can be of any good. Therefore, we have to stick to the basic values whether they flow out of our traditions or from our present-day politics.

In our day-to-day work we do make mistakes. However, we should be bold enough to accept them and always ready to correct them. We have made many changes in our policies and would continue to do so whenever necessary so that we are able to put our poor people on their feet and make India strong. World history tells us that a country does not progress through the barrel of a gun. A country makes progress only when its people are served well, when they are strong and when the Government is run with their consent.

Whatever our party or political ideology, we should be united for the defence, unity and territorial integrity of our country. Today we should have only one slogan and that should be : Let us be one, let us be courageous and let us march forward.

Whether in uniform or without it, all of you should regard yourselves as soldiers of the land and be determined to lay down your lives, if necessary, in the cause of the country. We are all soldiers today and shall fight for freedom and the advancement of humanity.