

Prime Minister's Speech on Independence day August 15, 2007

My dear countrymen, brothers, sisters and dear children

Today we celebrate the 60th anniversary of our Independence. My greetings to you all on this day of national celebration.

Today we take special pride in saluting our beloved tricolor. Let us recall with pride the great sacrifice of our freedom fighters, whose undying love for India secured us our freedom.

On this happy occasion join me in saluting the hard work of all our citizens who have, over these 60 years, helped build a new India. Let us bow our head in memory of all those brave jawans and all our brave citizens who have sacrificed their lives for the cause of our unity, integrity and progress.

Sixty years ago the people of India began a new journey as a free nation, inspired by the message and vision of Mahatma Gandhi. But Gandhiji's dream of a free India would only be fully realized when we banish poverty from our midst.

As I stand here and look at our tricolor fly high and fly majestically, my thoughts go to what I have said at these ramparts in the last three years. I have, over these three years, outlined a new vision of a caring India:

An India that is united despite its many diversities.

An India that is not divided by caste, creed or gender.

An India in which the creativity and enterprise of every citizen can find its full and free expression.

An India in which the weak and downtrodden are empowered, the disabled find support, the destitute find succour and every individual is touched by the hand of progress and development.

An India in which no person or region is left out of the journey of development and progress.

An India in which every citizen can live a life of dignity, self-respect, decency and hope; where every citizen feels proud to say - I am Indian!

An India that lives in peace with all neighbours and all nations.

An India that has regained its due place in the comity of nations.

This vision of India is our proud inheritance from our national movement. We are committed to fully realizing it. We have worked hard to translate this vision into reality, through legislative action, new programmes and new policies. Towards this end we have vastly increased fiscal support to social and human development.

Today, when I look back, I can say with some satisfaction that we are undoubtedly moving forward in the right direction. We have been slow in taking some steps; we have dithered at times, and stumbled some times. We have had success on some fronts, and setbacks on some others. But, there is no doubt that we have been steadfast in our resolve, firm in our convictions and resolute in our commitment to the welfare of the common man (aam aadmi).

We do feel a sense of satisfaction that on many fronts we have done well. Yet, we are aware that there is much more to be done. We have moved forward in the many

battles against poverty, ignorance and disease. But can we say we have won the war? We have been able to step up the rate of growth. But can we say we are satisfied with the pace? Even after years of development and rising growth rates, why have we not been able to banish mass poverty and provide employment to all? Why do some regions of the country continue to lag behind?

I ask these questions not to belittle our achievements, but to inspire us to greater effort. I ask not to make you feel dispirited, but to enthuse you to march forward.

Since Independence, our development process has empowered our workers and farmers; it has made our citizens skilled and energetic; and, has made our business class dynamic. They are driving higher economic growth through their creativity and enterprise. Our economy is now growing at historically unprecedented rates. This enables us to generate the resources required for eradication of poverty, for education and health care for all. Poverty eradication is now a feasible goal.

How do we translate this goal into reality? We must understand that it is only through sustained economic growth and development that we can banish poverty from our midst. There is no magic wand. As creativity and enterprise blossom, new jobs are created and new incomes for new generations of working people.

As incomes rise, so do government revenues that help finance the large increase in public expenditure that we need for poverty eradication, for universalisation of education and health care, for agriculture and irrigation, and for basic infrastructure. It is such investments that help eradicate poverty.

Over the last three years, we have significantly increased public expenditure in the social sectors. This is in line with our commitment to the welfare of the aam aadmi. Central Government spending on education has been tripled. In health care, agriculture, irrigation and rural development it has more than doubled.

This unprecedented expansion in social sector expenditure has enhanced the welfare of our people. Through the historic National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, we have made basic employment for 100 days a legal right. As a result the poorest of our poor are now assured of minimum household income. Today half the country is covered by the programme. We are committed to implementing it across the entire country. We are confident that this social safety net will fulfill Gandhiji's dream of antyodaya - our humble attempt to wipe the tears of the poor.

We have kept our focus on giving a new deal to rural India. We have doubled the supply of credit for farmers, reduced its cost and, where farmers have been in distress, we have written off interest and rescheduled loans. We have helped increase farmers' income by raising substantially the support price for wheat and rice. Through Bharat Nirman, we are investing in rural connectivity – road, electricity and telephone connectivity. Bharat Nirman is our effort at bridging the urban rural divide.

This, I believe, is only a part of our total effort. There is more to be done and more will be done. In the coming years our main emphasis will be on agricultural development. We will soon launch a special programme to invest Rs 25,000 crore in agriculture, to enhance the livelihood of our farmers and increase food production.

We will also focus on the needs of our farmers in dry and drought prone regions. I am touring a few states to personally review the agricultural situation across the country.

Our growing economy and population need more foodgrains. I am confident that as we roll out our ambitious agricultural development programme, we will see a boost in food grain production in all parts of the country, particularly in regions untouched by the first Green Revolution. Farmers are the backbone of our nation. Unless they prosper, the nation cannot prosper. I reassure our farmers that their welfare lie at the core of all our concerns.

The transformation of rural India that we seek, and the progress we seek, are not possible unless we increase the productivity of our farms and the income of our farmers. But, given the large population dependent on farming and the small size of our farms, there are limits to how much income agriculture alone can generate.

India cannot become a nation with islands of high growth and vast areas untouched by development. Where the benefits of growth accrue only to a few. This is good neither for our society nor for our polity.

Therefore, it is essential that we create new employment opportunities outside of agriculture. Remember, there is no developed country today anywhere in the world, that is not an industrial economy. Industrialization is critical for progress.

If employment generation is the best weapon against poverty, then industrialization is the most effective means to create new job opportunities. In the past 60 years, many parts of our country have benefited from industrial development. In the next decade I want to see every region of the country to similarly benefit from the growth of modern industry. We will pursue policies that will help in our country's rapid industrialization.

It is true that the transition from an agrarian society to an industrial economy has always been a difficult one. But industrialization offers new opportunities and hope, especially for people in rural areas displaced by agrarian change. I agree that it is the responsibility of government to ensure that displacement does not lead to impoverishment; that those who lose land do not lose livelihoods; and, that those who have lost employment get better opportunities. We are, therefore, giving final shape to a National Policy for Rehabilitation and Resettlement for all those displaced by major projects. It is our societal obligation to ensure that the processes of development ensure that everyone is better off, and no one is worse off.

Industrialization would also mean urbanization. As more and more people live in urban areas, we need to have a more creative process of urbanization. This requires greater foresight in urban planning and development. Adequate compensation must be paid to those displaced and urban space must be used in an economical manner. We need to have adequate drainage facilities so that life in our cities does not come to a standstill during heavy rains. The day is not far off when half a billion people will be living in our cities and we need to prepare for that day.

Industrialization and urbanization will generate demand for first rate infrastructure. The expansion and modernisation of our highways, roads, railways and airports is

visible proof of our efforts to meet this demand. Much more is needed and will be done.

We need to do much more to generate and distribute more power, more efficiently. Everyone should get good quality power at affordable prices. I appeal to state governments to take this matter seriously as a weak power situation can become a handicap in industrialization and job-creation.

For every one of our people to benefit from new employment opportunities being created across the economy, we must ensure that every Indian is educated and skilled. No nation can progress unless its people are educated. We have shown our Government's commitment in this regard by tripling public spending on education in the last three years. I request states also to give priority to education, as education alone is the foundation on which a progressive, prosperous society can be built. Growing revenue earnings have improved the fiscal capacity of the States. They must now give priority to education.

Towards this end, our Government has decided to invest in setting up good quality schools across the country. We will support 6,000 new high quality schools - one in every block of the country. Each such school will set standards of excellence for other schools in the area.

As our primary education programmes achieve a degree of success, there is growing demand for secondary schools and colleges. We are committed to universalizing secondary education. An extensive programme for this is being finalized.

We will also ensure that adequate numbers of colleges are set up across the country, especially in districts where enrolment levels are low. We will help States set up colleges in 370 such districts.

The University system, which has been relatively neglected in recent years, is now the focus of our reform and development agenda. We will set up thirty new Central Universities. Every state that does not have a central university will now have one.

In order to promote science and professional education, we are setting up five new Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research, eight new Indian Institutes of Technology, seven new Indian Institutes of Management, and twenty new Indian Institutes of Information Technology. These will generate new educational opportunities for our youth. I am sure that, working together, we can ensure that at least a fifth of our children go to college as compared to one-tenth now.

The vast majority of our youth seek skilled employment after schooling. Last year I spoke the need for a Vocational Education Mission. Such a Mission is ready to be launched. We will soon launch a Mission on Vocational Education and Skill Development, through which we will open 1600 new industrial training institutes (ITIs) and polytechnics, 10,000 new vocational schools and 50,000 new Skill Development Centres. We will ensure that annually, over 100 lakh students get vocational training – which is a four-fold increase from today's level. We will seek the active help of the private sector in this initiative so that they not only assist in the training but also lend a hand in providing employment opportunities.

We should seek not just functional literacy, but good quality education – education that is affordable, accessible, equitable – and available to every boy and girl who seeks to study. For the needy we will provide more scholarships.

I wish to see a revolution in the field of modern education in the next few years. It is my fervent desire that India becomes a fully educated, modern, progressive nation. From this historic Red Fort, I would like this message to go to every corner of India – we will make India a nation of educated people, of skilled people, of creative people.

Democracy and development mean nothing for those who are not touched by the hand of progress. That is why, the architects of our Constitution placed special emphasis on the empowerment of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other weaker sections of society. In 60 years, we have seen many people climb the ladder of progress and social mobility. Yet, there are millions who still need our support and assistance.

We are committed to the economic, social, political and educational empowerment of SCs, STs, OBCs and minorities. Apart from effective implementation of all existing reservations for them, we have announced major scholarship and development programmes for their benefit. I am happy to say that we have been able to persuade the private sector to some extent to take affirmative action to ensure that these sections of society get a fair share of employment in industry and trade.

We have ensured that our tribal brethren get rights over land that they have cultivated for generations in forest areas. This should provide them a sense of security. The Prime Minister's 15-Point Programme is designed to ensure that Minorities are not left out of development programmes and that they have the necessary resources to transform their lives.

I also affirm our commitment to the welfare and well being of people with disabilities of various kinds, as well as our senior citizens for whom all of us have a special place in our heart and mind. We have set up the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights to ensure that children are safe and well cared for.

The problem of malnutrition is a matter of national shame. We have tried to address it by making the mid-day meal universal and massively expanding the anganwadi system. However, success requires sustained effort at the grassroots. Infants need to be breast-fed, have access to safe drinking water and health care. We need the active involvement of the community and panchayats to see that what we spend reaches our children. I appeal to the nation to resolve and work hard to eradicate malnutrition within five years.

While we have moved ahead in the last three years on many fronts, there is one area where considerable work remains to be done. Millions of our fellow citizens are not engaged in any formal employment in the organized sector. They work in small establishments, run their own little shops or offer their services on a daily basis. They have neither a social safety net nor a sense of economic security. They become destitute or indebted when they fall ill or suffer accidents. We are committed to their welfare and are taking steps to provide this sense of security.

We will provide an old age pension to all citizens above the age of 65 and living below the poverty line. We will also provide life and disability cover to the heads of all poor families or to one earning member in each family so that they and their families can get over the consequences of injury or death. We are also working on a health insurance model so that our poor do not have to bear the high cost of medical care. These programmes will be launched shortly.

There are many less developed regions in the country that must also benefit from development and economic growth. It is necessary to increase investment in backward areas to improve the regional balance in development. Towards this end, we have created the Backward Regions Grant Fund covering 250 districts. Over a period of time, these funds and our other initiatives will see that these regions catch up with other parts of the country. Every State, every district, every village, every person must be touched by the hand of progress.

In the rush of modernization and the race to develop we must not forget the value of conserving our resources. Water is one such scarce resource. I want each and every citizen to pay special attention to water conservation and to how we store and use water.

I urge states to look upon water as a national asset and work to resolve inter-state disputes over water sharing with an attitude of give and take. It is only through a cooperative approach that lasting solutions can be found to recurring problems, like floods and drought. We should work together to prevent the destruction caused by the ravages of nature, like floods.

In protecting our environment let us recall Gandhiji's wise words that nature has given us enough for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed. The Himalayas are part of our inheritance. Many of our rivers flow from them. We must protect our glaciers; we must keep our rivers clean and must increase our forest cover. Every citizen must ensure that our wildlife, especially endangered species like tigers, lions and elephants are preserved for the benefit of future generations. Keeping India green and clean should be a national and an individual obsession.

Each one of us must be aware of how what we do impacts on nature and our climate. People across the world are increasingly concerned about global warming. And so must we be. We must be economical in our consumption of fuels and energy. This we owe humanity and to posterity.

The land from which the message first went out that the whole world is one family (Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam) must set an example for the rest of the world in finding collective solutions to global problems.

I also want our young people to actively associate themselves with a "National Campaign for Cleanliness" in our neighbourhoods, in public places and markets, in villages and slums. Let us all take that one extra step to ensure that we live in clean and healthy surroundings. Each one of us can make a difference by practicing what we preach. As Gandhiji used to say, we must be the change we want to see.

In implementing our strategy of inclusive growth, State Governments, Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies have a crucial role to play. They must play an active role in mobilizing both resources and people for development. As Shri Rajiv Gandhi used to say, Panchayats must be actively associated with social development at the grassroots. They must ensure public participation in development programmes and proper functioning of our schools and hospitals.

To make the government, at all levels, more accountable and more transparent, and to fight the cancer of corruption, we had introduced the Right to Information Act. I want every citizen to make full use of this act to ensure that government functions properly and honestly.

In our quest for a caring, sharing and an inclusive society, we must develop the spirit of good neighbourliness with all people, irrespective of caste, creed or language. Our strength lies in our unity in diversity. Those who profess hatred and extremism, those who spread the virus of communalism and those who believe in violence and terrorism have no place in our society. We must all fight these anti-democratic, anti-social and anti-national forces, each in our own way, in our daily lives. Let there be no doubt in anyone's mind that the Government is firm in its resolve to fight all forms of extremism and terrorism.

We want to bring greater prosperity to the less developed regions of our country, especially the North-Eastern region and Jammu and Kashmir. This is our solemn commitment. Our State governments must be more active in creating an environment conducive to investment.

We are investing in better infrastructure and connectivity in the North-eastern States. In Jammu & Kashmir, our long-term development plan is bringing new investment to all the three regions of the State. Grassroots democracy has taken deep roots in the State and the Roundtable discussions have opened new avenues for reconciliation and development.

Our greatest achievement over the past 60 years has been the fact that we have built the firm foundations of an open society and an open economy. As a multi-cultural, secular democracy and home to all the great religions of the world, we feel proud to be Indian. And the world has come to view this with regard.

The success of a secular democracy in a nation of a billion people with such diversity is viewed with admiration. This great idea of India as a symbol of unity in diversity is increasingly viewed with respect and regard. Our tolerance, our capacity to assimilate and our ability to reconcile the irreconcilable are objects of wonder. The world wants us to do well. Our challenges lie at home.

India wants to have good relations with all the countries of the world. Big and small. Countries of the East and the West, the North and the South. Today, we enjoy good relations with all major powers and all developing countries. We have emerged as a bridge between the many extremes of the world. Our composite culture is living proof of the possibility of a confluence of civilizations. India will always be a nation bridging the many global divides.

India wants to live in a neighbourhood of peace and prosperity. I assure all our neighbours that we in India want peace and the best of relations with all of them. I sincerely believe that in the prosperity and well-being of our neighbours lies the key to our own security and progress.

We are a young nation. More importantly, we are a nation of young people. Once unleashed, the energy of our youth will drive India onto a new growth path. I assure you that for each one of you, and for our country, the best is yet to come.

However, we must not be over-confident. We have a long march ahead. We need at least a decade of hard work and of sustained growth to realize our dreams. We have to bridge the many divides in our society and work with a unity of purpose. We need to think of the future and be steadfast in our resolve to march forward. We must capitalize the dynamism that pervades our people, our youth, our farmers, our businesses,

We must have faith in our strength and confidence in our capabilities. Each of us have our individual identities. However, every citizen must recognize that we are Indians first and last. We fritter away our time on petty issues and pointless personal differences. I urge all political parties, all political and social leaders to resist the temptation to divide people along narrow, sectarian lines. Our strength is in our unity, despite our diversity. It is that unity which gave us our Independence. It is that unity that gives us our strength as a nation.

This was the dream of our founding fathers. This was the vision of our Constitution. We should not move away from this vision, and must face the future with courage. However, as Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said from these ramparts nearly sixty years ago, "laws and constitutions do not by themselves make a country great. It is the enthusiasm, energy and constant effort of a people that make it a great nation."

Let us all come together and work resolutely for the welfare of our people and for the development of our nation.

Jai Hind!