

PM Inaugurates 8th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas

January 8, 2010

“It gives me very great pleasure to join you at the inauguration of the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas 2010. Every year on this day we celebrate and honour the contribution of the overseas Indians is making for the development of their spiritual and ancestral home. We are immensely proud of the achievements of our diaspora. Your achievements have made a great contribution in changing the image of India to the world at large. Let me therefore join Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs and the Chief Minister of Delhi to welcome you to New Delhi and wish you a very happy New Year.

This year we have the great honour and privilege of having the distinguished Lord Khalid Hameed as our Chief Guest. Lord Khalid Hameed epitomizes the spirit of the global Indian. He is not only a very distinguished professional and entrepreneur in the field of medicine and healthcare but he is also an active leader in community services, including most importantly those that promote inter-faith harmony. It is our privilege Sir to have you as the Chief Guest this year. I extend a very warm welcome to you Sir and I thank you for immense thought provoking address on inter-faith harmony.

Yesterday, we held the first meeting of the Prime Minister’s Global Advisory Council of Overseas Indians. Some of the best and brightest men and women working in different parts of the world in various fields happen to be people of Indian origin. This is a tremendous knowledge pool and we would like the Council to reflect on where India should be heading in the next 20 years and what we should do in government, in business, in education and in arts and culture and in promoting inter-faith harmony to get where we ought to be 20 years from now. I would like to acknowledge the presence of the Members of this Council and I thank them for their time and effort in a very valuable cause.

The year gone by was an eventful year for India. We undertook the largest democratic exercise in the world during the general elections that were held in May, 2009. These elections reinforced the values of pluralism, tolerance and secularism that are a defining ethic of Indians, whether living in India or abroad.

I recognize the legitimate desire of Indians living abroad to exercise their franchise and to have a say in who governs India. We are working on this issue and I sincerely hope that they will get a chance to vote by the time of the next regular general elections. In fact, I would go a step further and ask why more overseas Indians should not return home to join politics and public life as they are increasingly doing in business and academia.

We are all legitimately proud of India’s vibrant democracy. But I cannot say that we have delivered in full measure on the enormous promise and potential of our country. I recognize the frustration well wishers feel when they lament why things don’t work faster or why well formulated plans and policies don’t get implemented as well as they should be.

It is probably true that we are a slow moving elephant but it is equally true that with each step forward we leave behind a deep imprint. There is a price that we pay in trying to carry all sections of our people along in national development. It is perhaps a price worth paying. Each citizen should feel that his or her voice is heard and have a sense of participation in national development. This is the only way we know to accommodate the enormous diversity of opinions and interests in our country. It is also this characteristic that makes our democracy so vibrant.

But underlying our system is an inherent political and economic resilience that gives our country and its institutions great strength and buoyancy. During the year gone by, the world faced an unprecedented economic and financial crisis. But the Indian economy weathered the crisis quite well. We were affected but not so much as many other countries. We hope to achieve this year a growth rate of around 7%, which is one of the fastest

in the world. We are equally optimistic that we can return to and sustain an annual growth rate of 9-10% in a couple of years.

The rapid growth of India's economy in the last few years has helped lift millions of people out of poverty. We have been able to expand access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities to a vast majority of our population. This is, however, a work in progress and much more remains to be done. I solicit your assistance to achieve those goals. We wish to accelerate the efforts to effectively address the key constraints in the areas of infrastructure, agriculture, health and education. These are the key priorities for the second term of our government.

We seek the active involvement of the overseas Indian communities in accelerating the pace of our economic and social development. In this context, it is important that we make efforts to connect the second generation of overseas Indians with their ancestral heritage and involve them actively in India's march forward.

India is today one of the top investment destinations. Economic opportunities are expanding everywhere. Overseas Indians however, while being good savers tend to be somewhat conservative investors. Most remittances are placed in bank deposits. Foreign Direct Investment in India by overseas Indians is low and far short of potential. I would urge overseas Indians to take a careful look at long-term investment opportunities now on the horizon in our country.

Indian industry is rapidly developing a global orientation. Many Indian companies are transforming themselves into multinational corporations with global brand names. As Indian industry steps outward, the Indian diaspora could do more to inter-link Indian industry with global markets. They could reinforce the improving brand image of India. I sincerely hope that the newly established Overseas Indian Facilitation Centre will become an effective hub for promoting two-way interaction between the overseas Indian community and our institutions.

About forty percent of the total remittances of over 50 billion US dollars in 2007-2008 came from skilled and semi-skilled overseas Indian workers. The security of our overseas workers and students is a top priority of my government. Many of them have been badly affected by the economic crisis. We are conscious of the need to structure an appropriate 'Return and Resettlement Fund' and we are working on a project to provide a social security safety net for the returning workers.

We have been negotiating with the governments of countries with large emigrant Indian populations to improve the welfare and protection offered to our workers. Over the last year, we have signed labour agreements with Malaysia, Bahrain and Qatar that create institutional frameworks to look into issues such as recruitment, terms of employment and workers' welfare. We also signed social security agreements last year with Switzerland, Luxembourg and the Netherlands and are now negotiating such agreements with a number of other countries.

The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs has also established the 'Indian Community Welfare Fund' in 18 countries in which there is a significant overseas Indian workforce. These funds support 'on-site' welfare measures including food, shelter, repatriation assistance and emergency relief to overseas Indians in distress.

In the coming years, India will need to invest much more in building physical, social and human capital. We must together position India as a supplier of skilled and trained manpower across a wide spectrum of skill sets and sectors. The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs is already collaborating with Indian Industry and the state governments in this effort. We would like to benefit from the services of overseas Indian professionals and volunteers to help Indian workers upgrade skills in specific trade where there is growing demand. At the meeting of the Council yesterday some very valuable suggestions were made to upgrade the quality of higher education system in our country.

We are now working to enhance work opportunities for our skilled manpower particularly in the west. We are trying to build labour mobility partnerships with key countries in the European Union and have finalized one such partnership with Denmark. These agreements will help to maximize benefits from labour mobility while addressing host country concerns such as irregular migration and integration problems.

We live in an increasingly integrated world; a very fast changing world. In our lifetime we have seen India walk with greater confidence and ability. In the lifetime of our children we would want them to see the India of our and their dreams - an India that lives up to the expectations of those who struggled to make it free and those who toil to take it forward and an India that wishes to live in peace, as it seeks prosperity for all.

As India seeks to realize its destiny in the 21st century, our engagement with the world draws its spiritual motivations from the values of our freedom struggle and our cultural and spiritual heritage. I end with a thought from Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore who once observed:

‘For us the highest purpose of this world is not merely living in it, knowing it and making use of it, but realizing our ourselves in it through expansion of sympathy; not alienating ourselves from it and dominating it, but comprehending and uniting it with ourselves in perfect union’.