

Mr. Chairman,
Hon. Ministers,
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests

It was with great pleasure that I accepted the invitation to address the Hindustan Times Leadership Summit. I am honoured to join the long line of distinguished persons who have been here before me. I note that among those who addressed the very first Summit and set the tone for it was Sri Lanka's former Foreign Minister, the late Lakshman Kadirgamar a man of great talent, scholar of repute, diplomat without peer and a great humanitarian - yet another victim of a terrorist bullet. It is another form of the same bullet that took the life of Shri Rajiv Gandhi, at the height of his political career. These are stark reminders of the menace of terrorism confronting democracies like India and Sri Lanka.

The initiative of the Hindustan Times in organizing this event is indeed commendable. As a print media leader with a tradition of commitment to truth and progress from colonial times to the present, the Hindustan Times remains a proud and courageous media icon of India today. This Summit is a creative and practical forum to reflect on the challenges for the future, so that the stakeholders can try and shape that future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There is little doubt that India's successful experiment with democracy stands out in this respect. As important is India's embrace of the free markets, all underpinned by millennia of tradition.

When one considers India's potential in shaping the future one cannot ignore the seminal contributions India has made in the past as a cradle of civilization. What the future holds for India will never be far removed from that great past. The land that gave the world the Bhagawat Geeta, the noble teachings of the Buddha, that introduced the zero revolutionizing scientific thought, that gave us the greatest practitioner of non-violence in modern times - Mahatma Gandhi, and led the way in defeating colonialism - such a land cannot be removed from its heritage despite the vast progress that it has achieved today.

The modern cities that change our perception of India, the exciting advances in technology, the daring spurt in industry the strides in medical research the rapid spread of education all these have strong links with its past. Democracy, pluralism, tolerance and the rule of law, the timeless and enduring values that are the hallmarks of India past and present will continue into the future of India as well. As a fellow South Asian democracy Sri Lanka has an abiding interest in, and commitment to supporting and promoting such a dynamic and vibrant India that espouses those common values.

From a Sri Lankan perspective one is inevitably drawn to reflect on the role of Buddhism in the fashioning of the Sri Lankan social and cultural traditions, as well as on the strong cultural and religious links that have been forged between our two nations through the span of the Buddhist era of two thousand five hundred and fifty one years. Our two countries also pride themselves in the rich heritage of religious and ethnic tolerance and the rich diversity of multi-cultural societies, despite the challenges of terrorism and security concerns. Today our common bonds are strengthened by our common trust in democracy.

Personally, Buddhism was my inspiration. I grew up in the city without losing my links with the village where most Sri Lankans live, as it is in India too. As the saying goes, the boy in me came out of the village but the village remained in the boy. In my own work today I am guided by the admonition of Arahata Mahinda son of India's greatest Emperor Dharmashoka who brought Buddhism to my country to King Devanampiyatissa in the 2nd century BC that a ruler is only a provisional custodian of one's territory - a custodian of the land the environment and all living beings that is under one's care.

When we try to look at the India that can be it would be useful to look at the paths our two countries have taken since independence, with Sri Lanka too approaching its sixtieth anniversary of freedom in a few months from today. If we take the two key areas, the economy and governance one can see striking similarities in the economic domain and some important contrasts in that of governance. In fashioning our economies both countries initially adopted a system of State command and control of economic approaches. This gave the State the major role in defining and driving development. Economic liberalization took place in Sri Lanka in 1978 while India delayed its move to an open economy till much later, in 1990.

In the sphere of governance one sees an important divergence. Commenting on "India at sixty" Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said and (I quote) "The success of the Indian experiment in pursuing economic development, social and political empowerment within the framework of a secular and democratic Constitution with respect for the rule of law and for fundamental human rights has earned for our country a special place in the community of nations (unquote).

In Sri Lanka, which remains a vibrant democracy, we lacked the advantage of a Constitution drawn up by our own people in keeping with our own ideals of freedom and governance. We began with a Constitution bestowed upon us by our former colonial ruler. The absence of a home-spun system of governance is something we are seeking to address today.

We find that India has evolved her own model of governance. This is a uniquely Indian approach which has led to India being universally applauded for its profoundly democratic and pluralist governance structure. In this largest of democracies in the last two decades India has continued to take measures to ensure that the benefits of this growth reach the many who are in need. Addressing this growth divide will remain the biggest challenge faced by India. The real form and content of the India that can be, will be defined and understood by how well India can enable those millions of her citizens to share the fruits of growth.

If I may be allowed to look at the Sri Lanka that can be, it is evident that we too need to correct a growth imbalance that tends to confine development to certain politically advantaged areas of the country. In addressing this we find it necessary to overcome the current threat of terrorism that is consuming so much of our energies and resources as it would in any other society too that is faced with such a daunting challenge.

Yet, our hopes of success in more even economic growth can be seen in the new development program we have launched in the Eastern Province that has finally been liberated from the forces of terror. This important achievement can pave the way for a speedy political solution curtailing terrorist fund raising abroad and their illicit trafficking networks demonstrating to them that the way forward is to join the democratic mainstream in good faith.

Lord Curzon, in his farewell speech in 1905 after seven years as British administrator of India, said, and (I quote) "The one great fault of Englishmen in India is that we do not sufficiently look ahead. We are so much involved in the toil of the day that we leave the morrow to take care of itself. (unquote). The topic of this address is an indication that India, from the time of Independence and 60 years later is not saddled with the weakness of our common colonial ruler that of not looking ahead.

The India that can be must be a regaining of all the greatness beginning with the Indus Valley civilization and surging beyond that into the challenging possibilities that lie ahead. The future must be a marshalling of the forces of social and economic change for India's benefit. One can see a rapid spread in education, with a rise in its quality, and much better access to health for all. There will be faster, cheaper and more widespread communications in a country that already has over 200 million mobile phones, with its inherent dynamic for change, much easier access to information that will help make democracy more meaningful and the further opening up of global markets to India together with more foreign investment.

The might of population healthy economic growth and other indicators apart the speed and dynamism of growth will bring much greater responsibilities on the India of the future responsibilities that will flow from her new status as an economic power house and an influential geo-political entity. These are responsibilities that go beyond that of a developing country. Yet, it is necessary to draw relevant lessons from the trends we have seen in the major powers that dominated the last century.

There is no doubt that all of us in the region look at India for a future strong economic leadership that will benefit not only India but also the other countries in the region. India must, whilst stabilizing itself as an economic power house help the neighbouring countries too to become economically stable. When I participated in the last SAARC meeting, I proposed that our region must go for a common currency. I wish to re-iterate on this aspect of our economic stability.

The very strength that will underline India's future would be best served by the strengthening of regional cooperation and bilateral relations. Let us bear in mind that we are now in the Asian Century. Prior to 1840 Asia was the economic heart of the world. Asia is regaining its rightful place today. Asia has given to the world the founders of all great religions. Asia must ensure, as it urges economically that it is looked up to for true leadership in this century and beyond with a moral dominance beyond comparison.

India now stands on the threshold of a unique position of leadership in the Asian Century. With her strength in people and democracy, and her leadership in economy and technology in the region, South Asia will increasingly look to India to position herself for more dynamic leadership of SAARC. India's neighbours will look forward to the sharing of her progress with them and to alleviate their concerns about instability in the region.

As it was cogently put forth by a senior Indian diplomat, the challenge for Indian diplomacy in this era of growing Indian stature and prosperity is to demonstrate that India is not a threat but an opportunity for her neighbours and the region. It is also pertinent to note that India has a unique responsibility to ensure that the entire region maintains peace without any outbreak of regional wars.

If there is a key lesson to be drawn from the experience of the past 60 years, it is that the "home grown" approach that is seen in the unique model of governance in India has served the country well in facing up to many of the challenges before it at the time of Independence and later. And, it is with our own "home-grown" solution that we seek to face up to Sri Lanka's own issues of governance including the conflict affecting the north of the country. A conflict which has been exploited by separatist forces who, through the use of unmitigated terror, pose a threat to India too. The Sri Lankan Government is facing up to this terrorist challenge with increasing success today.

It is necessary for me to repeat here that while my Government remains determined to fight terrorism, we are equally committed to seeking a negotiated and sustainable solution to the conflict in Sri Lanka. If those who carry arms against the State are willing to enter a process of genuine negotiation towards a peaceful and democratic solution, the government and the people will reciprocate. In this, it would not be out of place to look forward to understanding and assistance from our regional neighbours and friends, especially those with whom we share the strongest bonds throughout history. We will see in such understanding and assistance the true signs of emerging greatness.

It will be to a mature and understanding India that her neighbours will look to for leadership in the region. It will be a leadership that draws its strength from the common bonds of culture and co-existence.

Friends,

The India that can be is that which will face up to the challenges of the world today and in future, where its ancient wisdom and its new knowledge will help to establish new parameters for progress. The people of India more numerous than anytime in history with better education in better conditions of health and more prosperous than anytime in the past will have to show the world that Asia can play the lead in making poverty history.

This brings me to the key emerging issue of the day, global warming and climate change. India, a land stretching from glaciers to scorched plains, will have to take a lead in addressing the deadly consequences of climate change; a land that is sun-drenched for most of the year must show the rest of Asia and the world how the energy of the Sun can be harnessed to benefit governments and people with the advances in science and technology. Similarly, the resources in the vast ocean around our countries need to be fully harnessed, for which India, I am sure, can provide leadership.

I am aware of the problems that developing countries face today with the threat of Climate Change. As I said at the United Nations last month, our countries need time and support for change after such a long period of being left behind in the development race in the colonial and post-colonial periods. We in South Asia must deliver on economic development to improve the lives of the millions of our people; that priority needs to be understood. Yet, we cannot be blind to the needs of the Earth and the needs of future generations.

India of tomorrow will I hope take a wider view of growth that takes into account the future of our globe of its glaciers oceans forests and all of its living beings. With the resources of science, technology and wealth available to it we are encouraged that India is exploring investment in green development hugely expanding opportunities for employment and bringing more wealth to the people. Such a lead could well be the defining spirit of the Asian Century.

The India of the future, with her knowledge, technology and resources will be looked to for solving the problem of adequate basic food supply that is coming to the fore, due to prevailing styles of development and investment; while Bollywood will captivate the world, the land that in the 1960s gave the world its cultural ambassadors in the "sitar and the tabla" will be asked to establish new standards of culture, bringing a fusion of its rich past with a promising future.

Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It may seem strange to stress on the maturity of a nation so seeped in history. Yet, we are looking at a nation forged through the struggle for Independence, when at the stroke of that midnight hour, as the father of modern India said 60 years ago India awoke to life and freedom. What I imagine today is of a truly mature India that understands well the sensitivities and aspirations of other countries, societies and cultures. Such learned maturity will see India take others along with her to progress.

Of course, we as neighbours should also know how to handle this mature lady in our midst. The time for playful relationships, if any, are over. India's own maturity will call for similar responses from everyone who deals with her; especially from her neighbours who will always have the most to do with her.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The experiences of India and Sri Lanka in the six decades since Independence lead us to the mature understanding that generalized and solely theoretical experiences do not work in practice. My vision is of an India that can never be separated from my vision for Sri Lanka. I look forward to both India and Sri Lanka progressing as self-confident societies acquiring the capacity to imagine and apply policies that are best suited to the needs of our people our region and humanity.

In conclusion, I must say that from ages past, even before the dawn of history, India and Sri Lanka were linked with bonds that have lasted to this day. In the India that I can imagine I see this bond being forged even stronger in facing up to the many challenges that we shall meet, compelled by our common history and emerging future.

May the Triple Gem Bless you.