

**ADDRESS BY THE HON'BLE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRIMATI
PRATIBHA DEVISINGH PATIL, TO PARLIAMENT**

New Delhi, 4th June, 2009

Honourable Members,

1. I am extremely happy to address the first session of both Houses of Parliament after the elections to the 15th Lok Sabha. My greetings to all members, especially the newly elected members of the Lok Sabha. They are here having spent the last few months in the scorching heat trying to persuade their voters on how they could best represent the aspirations of their electorate. They now have the mandate and the opportunity to translate the hopes and aspirations of the people of India into change in the everyday lives of the people. It is indeed a unique privilege given to a chosen few to represent the hopes of over a billion people, a sixth of humanity.

2. I am sure that their anxieties, hopes and dreams will weigh on you as you commence your work. I urge you to use each day of the next five years in giving substance to those aspirations and in doing so, find greater meaning in your own lives. My good wishes are with you.

3. I congratulate the members of the Lok Sabha for unanimously electing the Speaker and that too a woman who is a Dalit with honourable credentials. This has enhanced the prestige of India's democratic traditions, that of the House and its members.

4. Last week the State of West Bengal was affected by a cyclone inflicting damage to lives and property. Let us convey our heartfelt sympathies to the bereaved families. My Government will extend all possible succour to the cyclone affected people of West Bengal.

5. I would like to congratulate the Election Commission and the lakhs of officials, who conducted the smooth and largely peaceful elections to the 15th Lok Sabha. Election to the Indian Parliament is truly the greatest festival of democracy in the world and this mammoth task has been executed exceedingly well. Democracy is one of the finest ideas that humankind has produced and every Indian election celebrates the freedom of choice that powers this idea. India has a unique place in the consciousness of the world as the largest functioning democracy. When an elderly woman in a remote village proudly holds up the indelible ink mark on her index finger, she is telling the world that she has the power to make change in her country.

6. In 2004 my Government had set before the country a vision of an inclusive society and an inclusive economy. It worked diligently towards translating this vision into policies and programmes. My Government sees the overwhelming mandate it has received as a vindication of the policy architecture of inclusion that it put in place. It is a mandate for inclusive growth, equitable development and a secular and plural India. My Government is determined to work harder and better to realize these goals.

7. A continuing priority of my Government would be to consolidate the ongoing flagship programmes for inclusion. This will require re-energising government and improving governance. It will require meeting the challenge of restoring economic growth, which is now hurt by the global economic slowdown, back to a higher growth path. High growth is necessary to provide the government the capacity to expand opportunities for employment. It is necessary to provide resources to increase outlays in education, health care and infrastructure to meet the needs of all regions and all people. My Government will ensure that the growth process is not only accelerated but also made socially and regionally more inclusive and equitable. The yearning of our people for inclusiveness - economic social and cultural -- and the rejection of the forces of divisiveness and intolerance that my Government spoke of in 2004 continues as both its inspiring vision and its unfinished business.

8. My Government is acutely conscious of the challenge of rising expectations. There would be ten broad areas of priority for my Government for the next five years.

- Internal security and preservation of communal harmony;
- Stepping up of economic growth in agriculture, manufacturing and services;
- Consolidation of the existing flagship programmes for employment, education, health, rural infrastructure, urban renewal and introduction of new flagship programmes for food security and skill development;
- Concerted action for the welfare of women, youth, children, other backward classes, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, minorities, the differently-abled and the elderly along with strengthened social protection;
- Governance reform;
- Creation and modernization of infrastructure and capacity addition in key sectors;
- Prudent fiscal management;
- Energy security and environment protection;
- Constructive and creative engagement with the world and
- Promotion of a culture of enterprise and innovation.

9. My Government will maintain utmost vigil in the area of internal security. A policy of zero-tolerance towards terrorism, from whatever source it originates, will be pursued. Stern measures to handle insurgency and left wing extremism will be taken. Government has already prepared a detailed plan to address internal security challenges to be implemented in a time-bound manner. The Multi-Agency Centre will be strengthened to ensure effective intelligence

sharing and processing and Subsidiary Multi-Agency Centres will be activated in all States. The National Investigation Agency has become operational and will be empowered to handle terror-related offences. Central and State police forces and intelligence agencies will be expanded and fully equipped with the best technology. A national counter-terrorism centre will be established to take pro-active anti-terrorism measures. Special Forces and Quick Response Teams will be raised and deployed in vulnerable areas. Enhanced information and intelligence sharing on a real time basis, would be made possible by the creation of a net-centric information command structure.

10. My Government will actively pursue police reform and in order to ensure the active participation of the citizenry in internal security, community policing will be promoted. At the same time government will continue to constructively engage with all groups that abjure violence in the Northeast, Jammu and Kashmir and other parts of the country.

11. Communal harmony shall be preserved at all costs. The mandate my Government received was unmistakable in that the people wanted the country's secular fabric to be protected. With this objective my Government will seek early approval of the Bill introduced in Parliament for the prevention of communal violence.

12. Our armed forces are the nation's pride, a symbol of our values of sacrifice, valour and the spirit of national integration. India's defence forces stand committed to the task of defending the territorial integrity of the country. They will be fully enabled with modern technology to repel any threat from land, sea or air. To enhance combat efficiency as also to address the requirements of modern day warfare, a number of steps are under way. The welfare of ex-servicemen will continue to be accorded high priority. The Committee headed by the Cabinet Secretary, to look into the issue of One Rank One Pension has already commenced its work and expects to complete it by the end of June 2009.

13. The Unique Identity Card scheme for each citizen will be implemented in three years overseen by an Empowered Group. This would serve the purpose of identification for development programmes and security.

14. My Government was able to accelerate growth substantially in the last five years to a record five-year average of 8.5%. This produced an impressive expansion in high quality jobs and also gave us the capacity to guarantee rural employment and expand social and economic infrastructure in an unprecedented manner. My Government gave a new deal to agriculture. Public investment in agriculture was increased, farm loans of over Rupees sixty five thousand crore waived and there were handsome increases in procurement prices. These measures contributed to a revival of agricultural growth. My Government was able to expand access to education through a large number of new schools and other educational institutions, support a mid-day meal programme covering over fifteen crore children, provide nearly a crore of deserving students with scholarships each year, loans to over 16 lakh students and create a new wave of investment in institutions of higher

education. It was able to revamp rural public health infrastructure and massively expand social protection through insurance schemes and pensions. Government was also able to effect pay revision for its employees including defence personnel, public sector employees and teachers in colleges. My Government could also increase assistance to States substantially in the last five years. All these initiatives were possible because high growth generated more resources. It is therefore imperative that our growth momentum is resumed.

15. The current financial year is expected to see a slowing down of growth on account of the global recession. My Government has responded to this unforeseen situation with a range of measures, including three stimulus packages, which have begun to show results. It is a matter of satisfaction that the Indian economy has not suffered the kind of slowdown that has been witnessed in almost every other country of the world. Government has also actively engaged with the international community, especially through the forum of the G-20, in order to ensure that coordinated action is taken at the global level and the necessary reforms brought in at the earliest. Our immediate priority must be to focus on management of the economy that will counter the effect of the global slowdown by a combination of sectoral and macro-level policies. My Government will focus attention on sectors that are adversely affected, especially Small and Medium Enterprises, exports, textiles, commercial vehicles, infrastructure and housing. This must be accompanied by measures to achieve a countercyclical expansion in public investment in infrastructure sectors including public-private partnerships in these sectors. Financing the investment will be a critical constraint and my Government is determined to ensure that innovative steps are taken in this area, consistent with a medium-term strategy of prudent fiscal management.

16. Our country has benefited from large foreign investment flows in recent years. These flows, especially foreign direct investment, need to be encouraged through an appropriate policy regime. There is also a need to augment resources in the banking and insurance sectors in order to permit them to serve the needs of society better. Towards this end my Government will recapitalize the public sector banks to strengthen their financial position and also bring legislation to establish a regulator for the pension sector.

17. The momentum of public investment in agriculture and irrigation built up in the last five years will be further expanded and the three major instruments -- the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana, National Food Security Mission and the National Horticulture Mission -- introduced by my Government strengthened.

18. The flagship programmes which my Government introduced have moved the country towards inclusive development. It would be our endeavour to consolidate these programmes in the next five years. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act has proved to be what it promised--an effective social protection measure and the largest programme in the world for rural reconstruction. Its transformational potential is unfolding before our eyes. My Government would enlarge the scope of works permitted under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act presently limited to unskilled manual work.

The opportunity for improving land productivity through the NREGA will be maximized through better convergence of NREGA with other programmes. To ensure transparency and public accountability, independent monitoring and grievance redressal mechanisms will be set up at the district level.

19. The National Rural Health Mission has begun to strengthen rural public health infrastructure. The Mission would be consolidated to make perceptible reduction in infant mortality and maternal mortality in the next five years. Vaccine producing institutes in the public sector will be revived to support the immunization programme. My Government will expand the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana to cover all families below the poverty line in the next five years. Malnutrition has emerged as a major health challenge needing urgent response. Hence the nutrition delivery programme will be comprehensively revamped to bring it under the watch of panchayat institutions and move to provision of hot cooked meals in anganwadis.

20. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan has been able to provide access to children to elementary schools and retention has increased on account of the universal mid-day meal programme. The focus will be on making quality education a right through the enactment of the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Bill now under consideration of Parliament. The Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan will universalize access to secondary education. The massive expansion in higher education through new institutions under implementation in the Eleventh Plan will enable the country to meet the challenge of education in full measure. In the last five years, a wide range of scholarships and educational loans was introduced for the needy and deserving students. This effort will be reviewed and further strengthened. Government's strategy for higher education will be formulated around a three-fold objective of expansion, inclusion and excellence. The suggestions given by the National Knowledge Commission will guide the formulation and implementation of the strategy.

21. While male literacy went up to over 75 percent in the last census and is expected to be higher now, female literacy was only 54 percent in 2001. My Government will recast the National Literacy Mission as a National Mission for Female Literacy to make every woman literate in the next five years. Increased female literacy is expected to become a force multiplier for all our social development programmes.

22. My Government launched Bharat Nirman five years ago as a time-bound business plan for rural infrastructure. It has succeeded in reaching basic infrastructure of roads, electricity and telephone to a large number of villages. It has also achieved most of the targets of rural water supply, rural housing and has increased irrigation potential. The remaining tasks will be completed in the second phase of Bharat Nirman. It is also proposed to set enhanced targets for Bharat Nirman in the second phase.

- The Indira Awas Yojana, which exceeded the original target of sixty lakh houses for the period 2004-2009, will now take up double the target of rural housing to one crore twenty lakh houses to be completed in the next five years.

- Rural Water supply programme will be completed by 2011 and handed over to be managed by panchayats in the next Plan.

- The rural telecommunication target will be set at reaching 40% rural teledensity in the next five years and expanding broadband coverage to connect every panchayat to a broadband network in three years. The scheme for Common Service Centres or e-kiosks will be suitably repositioned to be a network of panchayat-level Bharat Nirman Common Service Centres to provide government services to citizens in rural areas.

- New targets would be set for rural electrification, irrigation and road connectivity.

23. The Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) with approval of projects of nearly Rs. 50,000 crore in the last four years is reshaping our cities and has been widely welcomed. It will continue to focus on infrastructure, basic services and governance reform and increase support to cities to upgrade public transport. Over 15 lakh houses are under construction for the urban poor. There is a need to focus urban housing programmes on the poor living in slums. My Government proposes to introduce a Rajiv Awas Yojana for the slum dwellers and the urban poor on the lines of the Indira Awas Yojana for the rural poor. The schemes for affordable housing through partnership and the scheme for interest subsidy for urban housing would be dovetailed into the Rajiv Awas Yojana which would extend support under JNNURM to States that are willing to assign property rights to people living in slum areas. My Government's effort would be to create a slum free India in five years through the Rajiv Awas Yojana.

24. My Government proposes to enact a new law -- the National Food Security Act -- that will provide a statutory basis for a framework which assures food security for all. Every family below the poverty line in rural as well as urban areas will be entitled, by law, to 25 kilograms of rice or wheat per month at Rs. 3 per kilogram. This legislation will also be used to bring about broader systemic reform in the public distribution system.

25. Government is acutely conscious of its responsibilities to provide greater opportunities for women, youth, other backward classes, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, minorities and the elderly as well as strengthen measures for social protection for categories with special vulnerabilities. Some concrete steps that are proposed to create equal opportunities for women are reservation to elected bodies at all levels, reservation in jobs and a National Mission on Female Literacy.

26. Over 50 percent of our population is below 25 years of age and their creative energy is our greatest strategic resource. The challenge is to invest in their education, employability and employment. India has the capacity to contribute to a fourth of the global work force if it invests in skill development of its youth. Education which provides employable skills holds the key for equal opportunities for Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Minorities. My Government has in the last five years

brought in legal changes and investment in this direction. These would be consolidated. Besides making massive investment in education, government will focus on the national skill development initiative that has commenced operation with the very ambitious goal of creation of 500 million skilled people by 2022 so that we realize the demographic dividend.

27. The implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act would be monitored to ensure that all title deeds are distributed by end of 2009.

28. My Government will continue to accord the highest priority to the welfare of minorities. The Prime Minister's New 15 Point Programme for the Welfare of Minorities and the action taken on the recommendations of the Sachar Committee have, to some extent, succeeded in ensuring an equitable share for the minorities in government resources, jobs and plans. Steps under way would be consolidated further. Government would strive to strengthen and modernize the administration of wakfs, reform the management of Haj operations and set up an Equal Opportunity Commission.

29. The Amendment Bill to the Land Acquisition Act and the Rehabilitation and Resettlement Bill prepared to protect farmers and others dependent on farming from unfair displacement and which was placed before Parliament could not be carried through. It will be our endeavour to have these bills reintroduced and enacted in the budget session of Parliament.

30. My Government considerably enhanced provisions for social security through old age pension for all people below the poverty line and above 65 years of age, all handicapped people and all widows above the age of forty. It will examine extending social protection to other persons at special risk. Social security schemes for other occupations like landless labour, weavers, fisherfolk, toddy tappers, leather workers, plantation labour, construction labour, mine workers and beedi workers will be appropriately expanded.

31. An area of major focus for my Government would be reform of governance for effective delivery of public services. Reports of the Administrative Reforms Commission would guide the effort. Reform of structures in the higher echelons of government, increased decentralization, inclusion of women and youth in governance, process reform and public accountability would be key areas for focused action. As part of process reform, all proposals to the Cabinet will have to report on how the proposal under consideration will enhance the goals of equity or inclusion, innovation and public accountability.

32. My Government will initiate steps within the next hundred days on the following measures:

- Early passage of the Women's Reservation Bill in Parliament providing for one-third reservation to women in State legislatures and in Parliament;

- Constitutional amendment to provide 50 percent reservation for women in panchayats and urban local bodies. Women suffer multiple deprivations of class, caste and gender and enhancing reservation in panchayats and urban local bodies will lead to more women entering the public sphere;
- Concerted effort to increase representation of women in central government jobs;
- A National Mission on Empowerment of Women for implementation of women-centric programmes in a mission mode to achieve better coordination;
- A voluntary national youth corps which could take up creative social action around the river cleaning and beautification programme beginning with the river Ganga;
- Restructuring the Backward Regions Grant Fund, which overlaps with other development investment, to focus on decentralized planning and capacity building of elected panchayat representatives. The next three years would be devoted to training panchayat raj functionaries in administering flagship programmes;
- A public data policy to place all information covering non-strategic areas in the public domain. It would help citizens to challenge the data and engage directly in governance reform;
- Increasing transparency and public accountability of NREGA by enforcing social audit and ensuring grievance redressal by setting up district level ombudsman;
- Strengthening Right to Information by suitably amending the law to provide for disclosure by government in all non-strategic areas;
- Strengthening public accountability of flagship programmes by the creation of an Independent Evaluation Office at an arm's distance from the government catalysed by the Planning Commission. It would work on a network model by collaborating with leading social science research organizations and concurrently evaluate the impact of flagship programmes and place it in the public domain;
- Establishing mechanisms for performance monitoring and performance evaluation in government on a regular basis;
- Five Annual Reports to be presented by government as Reports to the People on Education, Health, Employment, Environment and Infrastructure to generate a national debate;
- Facilitating a Voluntary Technical Corps of professionals in all urban areas through JNNURM to support city development activities;

- Enabling non government organisations in the area of development action seeking government support through a web-based transaction on a government portal in which the status of the application will be transparently monitorable;
- Provision of scholarships and social security schemes through accounts in post offices and banks and phased transition to smart cards;
- Revamping of banks and post offices to become outreach units for financial inclusion complemented by business correspondents aided by technology;
- Electronic governance through Bharat Nirman common service centres in all panchayats in the next three years;
- A model Public Services Law, that covers functionaries providing important social services like education, health, rural development etc. and commits them to their duties, will be drawn up in consultation with states;
- A National Council for Human Resources in Health as an overarching regulatory body for the health sector to reform the current regulatory framework and enhance supply of skilled personnel;
- A National Council for Higher Education as recommended by the Yashpal Committee and the National Knowledge Commission to bring in reform of regulatory institutions;
- Develop a "brain gain" policy to attract talent from all over the world into the 14 universities proposed in the 11th plan to position them as "Innovation Universities";
- A roadmap for judicial reform to be outlined in six months and implemented in a time-bound manner;
- Targeted identification cards would subsume and replace omnibus Below Poverty Line (BPL) list. NREGA has a job card and the proposed Food Security Act would also create a new card. Identification of beneficiaries for other programmes which currently use the omnibus BPL list would improve identification based on programme objectives with the common underlying principle that all identification of beneficiaries will be done through gram sabhas and urban local bodies and the list placed in the public domain to be open to challenge;
- A Delivery Monitoring Unit in the Prime Minister's Office to monitor flagship programmes and iconic projects and report on their status publicly;
- Suitably institutionalized quarterly reporting on Flagship programmes as "Bharat Nirman Quarterly Reports" where Ministers would publicly report on progress through the media.

33. Infrastructure is a fundamental enabler for a modern economy and infrastructure development will be a key focus area for the next five years. Public investment in infrastructure is of paramount importance. Bottlenecks and delays in implementation of infrastructure projects because of policies and procedures, especially in railways, power, highways, ports, airports and rural telecom will be systematically removed. Public-private partnership (PPP) projects are a key element of the strategy. A large number of PPP projects in different areas currently awaiting government approval would be cleared expeditiously. The regulatory and legal framework for PPPs would be made more investment friendly. My Government will continue its special emphasis on infrastructure development in the North-East and Jammu and Kashmir and enhance connectivity to these regions.

34. Our fellow citizens have every right to own part of the shares of public sector companies while the government retains majority shareholding and control. My Government will develop a roadmap for listing and people-ownership of public sector undertakings while ensuring that government equity does not fall below 51 %.

35. My Government is firmly committed to maintaining high growth with low inflation, particularly in relation to prices of essential agricultural and industrial commodities. It will steadfastly observe fiscal responsibility so that the ability of the Centre to invest in essential social and economic infrastructure is continuously enhanced. This will require that all subsidies reach only the truly needy and poor sections of our society. A national consensus will be created on this issue and necessary policy changes implemented.

36. My Government has been able to significantly increase realization of direct taxes as a result of improved and simplified tax administration and this process will continue. The roadmap for moving towards a Goods and Services Tax will be vigorously pursued. My Government is fully seized of the issue of illegal money of Indian citizens outside the country in secret bank accounts. It will vigorously pursue all necessary steps in coordination with the countries concerned.

37. Coordinated action for energy would be guided by the integrated energy policy. The effort would be to see that at least 13,000 MW of generating capacity is added each year through a mix of sources -coal, hydel, nuclear and renewables. Village and rural household electrification and reduction in aggregate technical and commercial losses will continue to be given the highest priority. Competitiveness and efficiency in the power sector will be enhanced through time-bound measures, including operationalising the provision of open access.

38. The pace of oil and gas exploration will be intensified and India's oil diplomacy aggressively pursued. Reforms in the coal sector, for which a detailed blueprint has been prepared, will be pursued with urgency. The international civil nuclear agreements will be operationalised with various countries even as domestic sources of uranium are exploited and work continues on the indigenously designed fast breeder and thorium reactors.

39. My Government will ensure that our space programme which has achieved wide recognition continues to bring rich dividends to society in agriculture, tele-medicine, tele-education and by providing information to rural knowledge centres, besides contributing to telecommunication, television broadcasting and weather forecasting. Several innovative initiatives commenced by government in the science and technology sector in the last five years and now under implementation will be further strengthened.

40. My Government is proactively addressing issues of climate change through eight national missions. Of these the National Solar Mission, the National Water Mission, the National Mission on Energy Efficiency, the National Mission on Sustainable Agriculture and the National Mission on Sustainable Habitat will be launched by the end of this year. The National Ganga River Basin Authority, set up recently will evolve a new action plan for cleaning and beautifying the river in partnership with the basin states.

41. My Government's foreign policy will continue to pursue India's enlightened national interest, maintaining the strategic autonomy and independent decision-making that has been its hallmark. India has a vital interest in the stability and prosperity of our neighbours. The highest priority will be accorded to working with our friends in SAARC to promote stability, development and prosperity in the region. Government will sincerely work with our neighbours to ensure that outstanding issues are addressed and the full potential of our region is realized.

42. My Government will seek to reshape our relationship with Pakistan depending on the sincerity of Pakistan's actions to confront groups who launch terrorist attacks against India from its territory. We will support initiatives in Sri Lanka, which can lead to a permanent political solution of the conflict there and ensure that all Sri Lankan communities, especially the Tamils, feel secure and enjoy equal rights so that they can lead a life of dignity and self-respect. India will make appropriate contribution to rehabilitate those affected by the conflict. In Nepal and Bangladesh, where multi-party democracy has returned, India will work closely with both countries to continue expanding bilateral ties for mutual benefit. Government will strengthen our close and vibrant partnerships with Bhutan and Maldives and continue to assist in the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

43. The momentum of improvement of our relations with the major powers will be maintained. The transformation of our partnership with the United States of America will be taken forward. Our strategic partnership with Russia has grown over the years, and we will seek to further consolidate it. With countries of Europe and Japan my Government will continue the sustained diplomatic efforts, which have produced qualitative changes in our relations since 2004. The multi-faceted partnership with China will be expanded.

44. My Government will continue to work with other developing nations. It will contribute to all efforts at peace in West Asia through the establishment of a viable Palestinian State at the earliest. The traditionally close ties with countries in the Gulf will be strengthened. The process of engagement with

Africa reenergized with the first Indo-Africa Summit organized by my Government will be further expanded. The multi-dimensional partnerships with countries in South-East Asia and the Pacific as well as Central Asia and the Latin American region will be consolidated.

45. The Indian diaspora estimated at over twenty-five million across the world is an important economic, social and cultural force and my Government will deepen its engagement with it. Our ties and kinship with the diaspora make us acutely conscious of their well-being and to be sensitive to their concerns. As a responsible member of the international community, India will work with other countries in tackling issues of common concern such as international terrorism, the global economic crisis, climate change, energy security and reform of multilateral institutions to reflect contemporary realities.

46. Honourable Members, my Government believes that in the knowledge society in which we live today, creativity, innovation and enterprise hold the key to people and nations realizing their potential. The "dreary desert sand of dead habit" must be left behind. Our young people are tearing down the narrow domestic walls of religion, region, language, caste, and gender that confine them. The nation must invest in their hope. My Government will ensure that its policies for education and science and technology are imbued with a spirit of innovation so that the creativity of a billion people is unleashed. The next ten years would be dedicated as a Decade of Innovation. It may be a symbolic gesture but an important gesture to drive home the need to be innovative in finding solutions to our many challenges. India's young population is naturally restless and wants to see change quickly. My Government carries the weight of their dreams. Together let us dedicate ourselves to making each day of the next five years, a day closer to the realization of their dreams.

Jai Hind.
