

**Transcript of the PM's first National Press Conference
held on 4th Sept 2004 at Vigyan Bhavan ,New Delhi .**

PM: Ladies and gentlemen; ever since I assumed the office of the PM, I have received several requests from distinguished ladies and gentlemen of the Press to interview me. Unfortunately, because of my other preoccupations, I have not been able to accede to these requests. But, nevertheless, I have been very keen to meet all of you, even though I am told that a Conference of this type at the level of the PM has not been held for, at least, a decade. I recognise there are risks, but I am ready to throw the pigeon among the cats.

I have a prepared text by way of introductory remarks, but I thought the best way to use this time is to give you all the time and attention and this statement can be taken as read. So, that will give you more time to ask me questions that you would like me to answer.

(The written statement of the PM is at the end of the transcript.)

Q 1: Mr. PM, your Government could not introduce a Bill to repeal the POTA in the last session of Parliament. Would you consider issuing an Ordinance to repeal it? If not, what is the time frame for repealing the POTA?

PM: Well, it is indeed regrettable that we could not introduce a Bill to repeal POTA in the last session of Parliament. But I crave your indulgence. You all know what was happening in Parliament. Parliament had to be adjourned *sine die*, before we thought Parliament Session should come to an end. Subsequently, Parliament has been prorogued. It is our intention to come with an Ordinance to repeal POTA. And, it will be done very soon.

Q 2: I wanted to ask you if you would admit any failure at all yet on the front of economic management in relation to inflation, in relation to faltering growth and in relation to reforms not keeping pace.

PM: I think, three months is too short a period to make a definitive statement. But there have been factors over which we have had no control. We have had drought. Subsequently, we had floods in several parts of our country. We have had to contend with the steep rise in international prices of petroleum products. Then we have had truckers' strike. So, the short-term economic situation, certainly, has worked out, in a manner, in which, perhaps, we would not have liked it to go.

Inflation is a matter of concern. As I said, the reasons for it are essentially the inflationary expectations generated in the wake of the fears of a widespread drought and the steep rise in international prices of petroleum products. I would also say that the overhang of excess liquidity, which had been building up for the last two years had to find an expression one day - and that has also complicated our task. But I am confident that we will soon be able to gain mastery over inflationary expectations. We have adequate stocks of foodgrains, adequate stocks of foreign exchange, to take care of the concerns with regard to inflation.

With regard to faltering growth, I think, as far as weather. Gods are concerned, we have no control. But there is no evidence that growth elsewhere in the economy is faltering. In fact, the industrial growth rate -the latest figure I have for the current year - is much better than the industrial growth rate for the previous years. Investment, I think, remains buoyant. The non-food credit estimates show a sharp increase vis-à-vis the last year, the export growth this year is much better than the last year. So, there is no evidence to believe, if you discount that adverse weather factor - there is any

deceleration in the rate of growth of our economy.

As far as reforms are concerned, I think, it all depends upon what you mean by reforms. The Common Minimum Programme has committed us to a reform path, it is not more of the same, but a reform path which takes into account and addresses the concerns of those sections of the community who have not benefited appropriately and adequately from the first phase of reform. We have to deliberately do some mid-course correction. But that doesn't mean that we have given up on reforms. Certain measures were mentioned in the Finance Minister's Budget Speech. We will stay in the course. But the whole programme has now to be sold to all our coalition partners.

When we are in a coalition, we have to carry all our constituent elements together and that certainly complicates. The task to a certain extent in time phasing. But I am confident that over a period of time, we will overcome all obstacles and, we will be able to implement the reforms that we have in mind effectively.

Q 3: Mr. PM, Sir, your statement makes a reference to your visit to Jammu & Kashmir shortly. Of course, as you know, the Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Kasuri has reached Delhi. Now, on the one hand, we have reports of continuing violence, infiltration and insurgency in the Valley; on the other hand, your Government is committed to out-of-the-box ideas on Kashmir. But some would say that we have not seen any forward movement. Your Government is still to begin a process of dialogue with Kashmiri separatists. We know that a special economic package is being prepared for Kashmir. Could you share one of these out-of-the-box ideas for the Valley that your Government may have in mind, Sir?

PM: Well, we are a Government, which is only 100 days old, and in this short period of time, we have gone through the exercise of completing the first round of all the elements, which were listed in the composite dialogue programme between India and Pakistan and I think what we have achieved in that area is not insignificant. It is our intention to carry forward the dialogue process. Even though I cannot say that I have a path-breaking statement to make, but progress has to be measured step by step. We are approaching the forthcoming visit of the Foreign Minister of Pakistan with a feeling of confidence and hope that the dialogue process can be sustained. But there are several other dimensions to the problems of Jammu & Kashmir. We are committed to engage all groups in Jammu & Kashmir in a constructive dialogue; that offer stands. I sincerely hope that all elements, including the Hurriyat, will take advantage of that offer.

Q 4: प्रधानमंत्री जी, एज ए पॉलिटिशियन आपकी बहुत जेंटिल पालिटिशियन छवि है। जब से आप प्रधानमंत्री बने हैं, विपक्ष का हमेशा कहीं न कहीं यह आरोप रहता है कि सोनिया गांधी जी सुपर प्राइममिनिस्टर हैं। जब इस तरह का आरोप लगता है, इस तरह की बात होती है तो आपको कैसा लगता है?

PM: I think there is no foundation for such statements. The Congress President, Smt. Sonia Gandhi, is the Chairperson of the United Progressive Alliance. And, as the Congress President also, she has every right to be interested in what goes on in the Government. But, I think, the insinuation that there are two separate centres of power has no foundation.

Q 5: Since the UPA Government has come to power, some of the Congress-ruled States are flouting the Inter-State Water Treaties and Tribunal awards with impunity. Punjab has enacted a law so that SYL is not constructed. Now, Karnataka is asking for another Tribunal. How do you view this? And, the Ministry of Water Resources has also come up with an idea to

empower the Centre to get the States to implement the awards and various treaties. How do you view that?

PM: Inter-State issues have their sensitivity and are delicate matters . Water in particular, in all present societies, gives rise to very strong emotions. Therefore, whatever we do, we have to be mindful of this extreme sensitivity and delicate nature of the issue. Now, if you are referring to what happened in Punjab, the subsequent events have shown that the Central Government is concerned about these developments. Consistent with the legal requirements, we have gone to the Supreme Court, seeking Supreme Court's advice upon the legality of the legislation that has been enacted by the Government of Punjab, and that is an indication that the Central Government takes its task seriously.

Q 6: We saw the Parliament being disrupted for days-on-end, even to the extent that the Finance Bill had to be passed without any discussion. This involved over Rs. 5,00,000 crores, and all this was public money. Do you think, Sir, the irresponsible behaviour on the part of Parliamentarians is justified? Has the time come to think of some measure to enforce some accountability and responsibility. Do you think that the time has come now to think of 'right to recall' to be given to citizens?

PM: Madam, you have raised a very important issue. I have stated it on the floor of both the Houses of Parliament that we have been living through abnormal times. The fact that Parliament is not allowed to function normally, that important legislations like the passage of the Finance Bill and the Demands for Grants, cannot be subjected, to normal processes of Parliamentary scrutiny, I think, is a matter of deep regret and concern. I do agree with you that the time has come for all political parties, regardless of

their party affiliations, sit together, evolve a new code of conduct, a new code of behaviour in Parliament. Parliament has been regarded as the custodian of our sovereignty and if Members of Parliament vote on the Finance Bill without scrutiny, without any serious discussion, that reflects on the quality of the whole process. And I sincerely hope that some way can be found to get over these present tendencies, which certainly are not conducive to orderly functioning of the democratic and Parliamentary processes.

Q 7: Sir, would your Government consider setting up of a joint programme of listening to radio waves from space in Pakistan, so that even the problem of Kashmir, which will be seen as a small problem, and a greater co-operation can come as a beginning between Pakistan and India?

PM: Well, we are in favour of all possible measures, which will promote greater cooperation and understanding between our two countries. As to your specific suggestion, this is a suggestion for action. But, I am sorry I haven't had time to reflect on it. Maybe, we should consider it on another occasion.

Q 8: Sir, during these 100 days some important States do not find representation in your Cabinet – namely Punjab, Orissa and a few other States. Are you planning a Cabinet expansion or reshuffle in a short duration?

PM: Well, you will, no doubt, hear about it when it does take place.

Q 9: डाक्टर साहब, आपको मिस्टर क्लीन कहा जाता है और विपक्ष शुरू से ही, जब से सरकार बनी है, दागी मंत्रियों का मुद्दा उठा रहा है और आपके सहयोगी भी, लेफ्ट पार्टीज़ विशेषकर, इन्हीं मुद्दों को लेकर

सरकार पर दबाव डाल रहे हैं कि वे भौंकते नहीं, काटते भी हैं। क्या आपको नहीं लगता है कि दागी मंत्रियों का मुद्दा भी है और सहयोगियों का दबाव भी है, तो कांग्रेस अगर अकेले सरकार बनाती, ऐसी संख्या होती, तो वह ज्यादा बेहतर होता सहयोगियों के बजाय, गठबंधन सरकार की अपेक्षा। तो दागी और उसके ऊपर क्या जवाब है आपका?

PM: Well, who is tainted and who is not a tainted legislator is a subject matter of considerable controversy. I think, the time has come when all the political parties must sit together and agree to electoral reforms, which will ensure that tainted persons of all shades of opinion do not get a chance to be elected as Members of Parliament. It is only this way that you can ensure that the criminalisation of politics or persons accused of corrupt practices do not make their impact on processes of governance. If the law of the land allows people to be elected as Members of Parliament, allows them to sit in Parliament, to sit in judgement on important legislation, and, then, expect that we will not respect the peoples' right to choose them as Ministers, there is if I may say so, some inconsistency there. So, all political parties have to sit together to evolve mechanisms of having an electoral system, which will not permit the so-called tainted people to get elected to Parliament. So, the problem has to be solved at the roots.

Q10: Mr. PM, Pakistan has been insisting that there can be no forward movement on Kashmir, unless there are solutions on Kashmir that are discussed. Is that a just demand? Do you feel, Sir, that Kashmiri leaders should be involved in the dialogue between India and Pakistan?

PM: Our view is that we should make progress parallelly on all these elements in the composite dialogue. We are not afraid of discussing Jammu & Kashmir. But we do not buy the argument that that is the only issue, which is affecting our relations between the two countries. With regard to dialogue with the Kashmiris, we have an elected Government in Jammu &

Kashmir and we are also willing to talk to all the elements in Jammu & Kashmir, who are not represented in the Assembly, provided they are willing to talk to us. We are not laying down any pre-conditions. All groups, I repeat all groups, whether they are in Jammu & Kashmir or in the North-East are welcome to talk to us. We are ready to talk without pre-conditions. Anybody, any group, which shuns violence, will find us ready to talk to them.

Q 11: Sir, You referred to one of the causes of inflation being the monetary overhang from the previous Governments. Would you advocate a return to tight money policy at this time, similar to the policy which you , in your previous *Avtar* as Finance Minister, had followed in 1995-96.

PM: No two situations are similar. The challenge before us is to moderate inflationary expectations without hurting the growth process. As to the precise combination of fiscal and monetary measures, I think, that is not an area where I can pronounce authoritatively. Monetary policy is the preserve of the Reserve Bank of India and, I am sure, the Reserve Bank and the Finance Ministry are alert to what needs to be done in that area.

Q 12: Sir, your Government has completed hundred days now, and your Government came with a lot of challenges in front of it. How would you rate the performance of this Government and your tenure as such?

PM: Well, I think, in the circumstances in which we have been placed, we had the problem of drought, then we had the problem of flood, and then we have had this extraordinary situation in Parliament where from day one, the functioning of Parliament, was sought to be paralysed. We were not allowed to perform the normal duties. In that background what we have achieved in

the last three months is a matter of some satisfaction to me. We would have liked to do more, but there were limitations. However, important steps have been taken to carry forward the commitments that we have made in the Common Minimum Programme. Some of these commitments are reflected in the Budget, some of these commitments are reflected in what we are planning to do in the educational field, the expansion of the Mid-Day Meal Programme, the expansion of Programme for Universalisation of Access to Education, the extra Rs. 10,000 crores which are being earmarked for programmes in the Common Minimum Programme in the Annual Plan for the current year and, above all, the fact that we are seeking and we are trying to change the focus of governance. These are some of the important achievements of the last three months.

Q 13: Last week, you set up a Group of Ministers to explore the possibility of promoting affirmative action in industry. Could you please tell us what precisely you mean by this. Would you like to react to fact that the first response of industry has been negative?

PM: Well, we do feel that opportunities for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and similarly placed disadvantaged groups in the private sector need to be enlarged. Modalities have to be worked out in close consultation, in cooperation with the private sector. There are several ways through which this objective can be achieved, and, at this stage, what we have proposed is, for a Group of Ministers to engage in constructive dialogue with the representatives of the private sector to see what is possible without legislation and, as of now, our hope is that private industry will show increasing sensitivity to provide more opportunities for the marginalized groups in the private sector employment.

Q 14: महोदय, चूंकि यह अंतर्राष्ट्रीय मसले से जुड़ा हुआ सवाल है, I would like to ask this question in English so that correspondents of the Foreign Press may also understand it that The question relates to the reforms of the United Nations, is to come up soon. You are going to the United Nations Organisation to take part in the General Assembly's session. You will be meeting American President George Bush there. It is quite well-known that two countries, out of the five Permanent Members of the Security Council, namely, China and U.S.A. are not supporting India for the permanent seat in the Security Council. My question is, when you meet George Bush in New York, what would be your attitude to see that the consent of America is sought, and if there is a condition that it is necessary to sign the NPT, then, what will be your attitude?

PM: Well, I don't think, anybody has asked us to sign the NPT. This is no longer a live issue, as far as I know. With regard to our membership of the Security Council, I believe, this is a legitimate aspiration, and for any reform of the United Nations system, interests and concern of countries like India cannot be ignored. We believe that the new international order should reflect to a much greater degree the concern of important countries like India, Brazil and, fortunately, there is an increasing support for the view that India should be permanently represented on the Security Council. we had the Japanese Foreign Minister here. Recently, I have also seen the Germans supportive of this idea. So, this is an essay in persuasion, and I think, we are making progress. But, I do not minimise the difficulties because in the world that we live in, we cannot take it for granted that those who have the power will necessarily give up very easily. But I am hopeful that in the long run, the voice of sanity will prevail and the world community will have the

wisdom to recognise that the United Nations in which important countries like India, representing the collective will of over a billion people are not represented, I think, is not a very healthy development.

Q 15: महोदय, आपके एक सीनियर केबीनेट कुलीग ने ऐडमिनिस्ट्रेशन से जो आरएसएस से जुड़े हुए ऐलीमेंट्स हैं या फासिस्ट ऐलीमेंट्स हैं, उनको बाहर करने का सुझाव रखा है। आप किस तरह से ऐसा करना चाहते हैं?

PM: Well, I have said on an earlier occasion, I do not want our educational system to become a prisoner of any ideology, or be excessively dominated by bureaucracy. Therefore, we are in favour of depoliticisation of our educational institutions, giving these institutions the maximum possible autonomy and giving them the freedom to manage their affairs with the sole concern for intellectual integrity and truth.

Q 16: What is your Government's policy on nuclear doctrine? The previous Government had a nuclear doctrine. Do you support it *in-toto*? Will you follow it, or will you evolve your own nuclear doctrine? What will be your policy on 'no-first-use'? Finally, what are your views or your External Affairs Minister's views whether a common nuclear doctrine should be evolved between India, Pakistan and China?

PM: Well, let me say that we are a nuclear weapon State and we accept all that goes with it. I have also stated on an earlier occasion that it is our view that 'no-first-use' posture is the right posture to adopt for a country like ours.

Q17: Dr. Singh, on the one hand, your Government wants economic activity to be increased. On the other hand, you are talking about expanding the scope of reservations. There is higher taxation and more controls are

coming in the pharma sector. So, don't you think that your policies are mutually contradictory?

PM: I don't think any contradiction in what we are trying to do. If we want that more opportunities should be provided for the underprivileged sections in the private sector or elsewhere, I don't think that will hurt the cause of growth. Growth, to be sustainable in the long run, must be seen to be equitable, and unless there is greater regard for considerations of equity, the sustainability of the growth process will be seriously in question.

So, I don't see any validity in the point of view that if we are concerned about enlarging the opportunities that are available to the people from the marginalized group, that necessarily is an anti-growth strategy.

Q18: When Narasimha Rao launched economic reforms in 1991, you were there to give him the technocratic inputs to carry out the reforms agenda. Now, reforms are at a progressive stage, where further progress is possible only if they are given sufficient political leadership - whether it is giving power to the farmers free, or fiscal bankruptcy of State Governments. The entire reforms agenda relies on political leadership, of which, so far, there is little sign. How do you propose to give political leadership to the reforms agenda?

PM: Well, political will cannot be simply legislated. If you ask anybody whether you have the political will, it is like asking a person: Are you patriotic? Do you have courage?

Everybody would say I have the political will. Now, at the same time, we have to recognise that there are problems. Different people have different perceptions. It is only through engaging all diverse elements in a constructive dialogue to recognise the imperatives of getting this country

moving again that we can hope to make progress. We are a functioning democracy. Anybody suggesting that we should give up democratic system and having accepted the route of democratic processes, being the guiding factor in our decision-making processes, we have to carry conviction with all concerns. I am not giving up hope, whether it is reforms to the power sector or reforms of other sectors, that we can't move forward. There are difficulties. But I am confident that given goodwill, given proper understanding to the issues at stake, we will make progress.

Take the case of Punjab, for example. The present Punjab Government came to power promising farmers free power, but when they came to office, they recognised that that was not a sustainable posture. So, they reversed what they had stated in their election manifesto. I am quite sure that politicians should be judged not by what they say while they are in Opposition, but what they do while they are in power. I have sufficient faith in our political system that when faced with difficult choices, we will take the right decisions. We saw it in early 90's and I dare say that it will happen again and again.

Q 19: प्रधानमंत्री जी, संसद में पिछले दिनों दो सेशन से जो गतिरोध चल रहा था, पार्लियामेंट की प्रोसिडिंग्स पूरी नहीं हुई, उसे 'स्टाल' कर दिया गया और 'अपोजिशन' की तरफ से कहा गया है, खासतौर से वाजपेयी जी ने आप से कहा है कि जो नेक्स्ट 'सेशन' तक के बीच में 'इन्टरविनिंग पीरियड' है, इसमें सरकार को अपनी तरफ से कार्यवाही करनी चाहिए। वह इस गतिरोध को कैसे खत्म करे, आपकी तरफ से क्या कार्यवाही हो रही है?

PM: Well, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. We have, I think, the forthcoming visit of the Pakistan's Foreign Affairs Minister. We have, this Opportunity to have the widest possible consultations with all political parties. We have met all the important leaders of the opposition. Yesterday,

I had the privilege of meeting Shri Vajpayee. As to the wider issues that you have raised as to what happened in Parliament does not get repeated, the Hon. Speaker of Lok Sabha has already taken some initiatives. He proposes to convene a meeting at which all these issues will be discussed.

Q20: The Budget this year provides for Rs.10,000 crore to meet the objectives of the NCMP. The NCMP promises a lot and the allocation for the current year is already less than what Ministries are demanding. This is despite the cuts in the Ministries' demands also. So, how do you propose to find resources to meet the objectives, given the constraints that you have under the Fiscal Responsibility and Management Bill?

PM: Well, I do not minimise the difficulties. But the Common Minimum Programme is not a one-year programme; it is a five year programme. I hope over a period of time if our economy does well, we will be able to find more and more resources to implement the programmes as outlined in the document of the Common Minimum Programme.

Q21: डा. साहब, 'डिस-इनवेस्टमेंट' और 'फोरेन डायरेक्ट इनवेस्टमेंट', यह दो ऐसी चीजें हैं, जब आपने 'रिफॉर्म' शुरू किया था तो उस समय यह दो बातें 'रिफॉर्म' की मुख्य धारा की थी, लेकिन अब जब कि आप 'डेवलपमेंटल इकोनोमिक थ्योरी' की तरफ जा रहे हैं। ये दोनों चीजें 'डिसइनवेस्टमेंट' और 'फोरेन डायरेक्ट इनवेस्टमेंट' क्या पीछे नहीं छूटती चली जा रही हैं? क्योंकि 'लेफ्ट अपोजिशन' है, इसे आप कैसे 'मेन स्ट्रीम' में लाएंगे?

PM: There is no change in our attitude to Direct Foreign Investment. One important thing to notice is that since the early nineties, we have had Governments of various shades of opinion and all of them have set targets of Foreign Direct Investment which are yet to be achieved. So, there is no doubt that this country needs larger doses of foreign investment. It will be

our effort to create a climate conducive to larger inflows of foreign direct investment. With regard to disinvestment, also we have no ideological aversion to disinvestment. But our view is that if there are profit-making enterprises in the public sector, these enterprises can continue to make reasonable profits and flourish under competitive conditions, then there is no earth-shaking necessity to privatise them. Even then they may need to disinvest, if they want to raise more resources. So, as regards profit-making enterprises working under comparative conditions, disinvestment, yes; but, not to the point which would change their character from public sector to private sector. So, there is, I believe, ample scope for disinvestment even under the newly-formulated view of the United Progressive Alliance.

Q22: इस देश के पूर्व प्रधानमंत्रियों ने 'आराम हराम है', 'जय जवान, जय किसान' और 'गरीबी हटाओ' जैसे नारे इससे पहले दिए हैं। प्रधानमंत्री जी, मैं इस तर्ज पर आप से यह पूछूंगा कि 21वीं सदी में आप इस देश को कौन सा संदेश या कौन सा नारा देना चाहेंगे?

PM: Well, I stated that right in my very first Budget Speech as the Finance Minister. In the concluding part of that Budget Speech I had said, quoting Victor Hugo, “No power on earth can stop an idea whose time has come.” And I had then suggested to the Lok Sabha that the emergence of India as a major global power happens to be one such idea whose time has come and I do believe that I have a vision, in which we will all work together to realise that ambitious goal.

Q23: Sir, no Congressman, including Gandhiji, was sent to Andaman. Bhagat Singh and Dhingra were also not sent there, but they have been given prominence, whereas the real revolutionaries, particularly thousands from Bengal, were sent there and hanged and they have been isolated totally. Is it the way of your secularism, which you want to implement in the country?

PM: Well, I don't claim that I have understood that question.

Q24: From politics, economics and others, to something personal, Mr. PM. Sir, you are known for your honesty, integrity and simplicity and I suppose nobody has to give you any kind of certificate to you for that. Do you approve of the manner in which some of your 'spin doctors' are busy in building your image? And I think you do not need any image building. Do you approve of the manner in which this is being done?

PM: Well, I am not aware of what the 'spin doctors' are doing.

Suppl Q: Such as when you board the plane to go abroad you ask for your ticket, where is the foreign exchange for your wife and शेर अपने दांत कभी साफ नहीं करता है।

PM: Well, I think you can hardly blame me for that.

Q25: Mr. PM, you talked just now about the profit-making public sector companies and that you need not privatize them if they function in a competitive environment. But the other issue remains of the large number of sick public sector undertakings. You have today announced that you set up another Board for public sector undertakings. Is that going to become another BIFR and is it just going to consider cases of various sick public sector undertakings without really doing anything? I am sure, you will answer this question in the backdrop of the huge public sector dissavings, which have an adverse impact on the economy.

PM: I hope this Board of Reconstruction does not become an instrument of perpetuating the loss-making character of a large number of public enterprises. Its function will be to identify enterprises which can be revived, simultaneously to identify enterprises which have no chance of being

revived whereby the best course of action would be to sell them off. So, I hope that this Board will adopt a practical matter-of-fact approach and our effort will be to find speedy solutions to deal with the problems of sick enterprises. Of course, in doing so, we will have to protect the essential interests of the workers involved in these enterprises.

Q26: Mr. PM, what is your evaluation of the present Indo-Chinese ties? Do you plan to visit China in the near future?

PM: I attach great importance to expansion and development of our relations with China. We have had recently a meeting between our senior representatives, who are negotiating on the boundary question. It is my hope that we can make progress in the resolution of the boundary dispute from the political perspective of our relations. I would, of course, be very happy to visit China. I admire the development of China, the way the Chinese economy and the Chinese society have been transformed in the last twenty years. India and China face similar problems. The two countries can learn a great deal from the development experience and the exchange of development experience.

Q27: Mr. PM, on the eve of Foreign Ministers' meeting, the PDP leader has made some suggestions like holding Friday markets on either side of the border. Do you think it is a feasible idea?

PM: I am amenable to consider all options which would expand interaction, cooperation, between the two countries. Also, in order to bring the two sides in Jammu & Kashmir closer, we have proposed the Muzaffarabad-Srinagar bus service. I hope, progress can be made in opening up that route. And in due course of time, we can enlarge similar confidence-building measures.

Q28: The supporters of the UPA in the Left are opposed to your Government's decision to increase the Foreign Direct Investment limit in insurance, civil aviation and telecommunication. They are also opposed to your Government's decision to reduce the interest rate on the Employees Provident Fund deposits. If you cannot convince the Left to accept your point of view, will you rollback these proposals?

PM: Well, I hope that we can persuade the Left. We are engaged in a very constructive dialogue. I am confident that we will have, at the end of the day, a conclusion which will, I think, be a forward-looking one so that we can go ahead with some of these proposals.

Q29: Regarding the relationship with Pakistan, you said, in the opening statement, "Our approach to the talks will be based on realism." Could you clarify the meaning of 'realism'? Does it mean that territorial issues should be put on the shelf for the time being?

PM: Well, We have to recognise that we are dealing with complicated issues, which have defied solutions for the past many, many years. But it is our hope that we can deal with these issues constructively. After all, we have lived through times where what was unthinkable in international relations ended up as having become a norm. Who could have imagined, twenty years ago, that the Berlin Wall would disappear or the Cold War would end? I have a vision that all countries of South Asia share a common destiny. And, it is that factor which convinces me that the time has come when we could take measured steps to move forward on the road to reconciliation, strengthening the relationship between various countries of South Asia.

Q30: School textbooks are being replaced in this academic year, which is creating problems for lakhs of students. Do you, as the PM, approve of the practice of changing the textbooks with the change of Government?

PM: I do not favour politicisation of educational processes. Certain distortions were introduced during the last five or six years. These need to be corrected. But I have said earlier also that we would not like our educational institutions or our educational system to become a prisoner of ideology or be subjected to excessive bureaucratic resolution. I am opposed to fundamentalism of all types, whether it is fundamentalism from the Left, or fundamentalism from the Right. What is necessary is that our educational policies should motivate all the actors in this field to give their very best, commitment to intellectual integrity, excellence and social equity. These are the wider national values, which should govern the management of educational affairs in our country.

Q31: You have just completed hundred days in the Government. But in these hundred days, the stock market never saw the highs, which it saw during the previous NDA Government. Does that bother you?

PM: A healthy stock market is something we would all like to see. But having said that, I do not claim that I understand all the dynamics of what influences the behaviour of stock market. My own feeling is that our Government remains committed to strengthening the climate for investment both public and private, creating an environment conducive to risk taking, creating an environment conducive to growth of savings and investment. Therefore, genuine investors should have no fears whatsoever that we are going to pursue a path which will not be business friendly.

Q32: माननीय प्रधानमंत्री जी, देश का युवा आपकी तरफ देख रहा है। उनकी जो बेरोजगारी है, उनकी समस्या है, इस बारे में आप क्या 'सजेस्ट' करेंगे?

PM: There has to be a prolonged approach to deal with the problem of unemployment. We are going to come forward, in the next one or two months, with an expanded version of Food-for-Work Programme. We have simultaneously to work on a development, which would ensure that our economy grows at seven to eight per cent per annum, that emphasis is given to those sectors which are labour-intensive, that includes agriculture, that includes a large number of labour-intensive export products. We will look at the great potential that exists for creating new employment opportunities in the services sector, particularly, services in the unorganised sector. We feel that by way of more energetic measures supportive of marketing, technological assistance and credit requirements of these enterprises, we could create a more congenial atmosphere for growth of employment in the country as a whole.

Q33: Mr. PM, one of your Ministerial colleagues, Mr. Mani Shankar Aiyar, abused one of the greatest freedom fighters of this country and surprisingly, the PM is still keeping mum on the issue. Would you like to say something on that? And, would you see any impact of that action on the forthcoming Maharashtra elections?

PM: Well, as far as what Mr. Mani Shankar Aiyar says, these are his personal views. These are not the views of the Government as a whole. If you are referring to Veer Savarkar, I have no hesitation in saying that Veer Savarkar was a patriot and a freedom fighter.

There are, of course, also aspects of his life and works which gave rise

to controversies. For example, he was associated with a particular ideology of Hindutva with which many of us don't agree. Also, one cannot, I think, ignore the fact that he was the co-accused in the Mahatma Gandhi murder case, even though he was acquitted. I don't believe any good is achieved by speaking ill of the dead. Therefore, this is an unnecessary controversy. Mani Shankar Aiyar has already clarified that what he said on the subject was not as a member of the Government, but in his personal capacity. I think history provides us the luxury of interpreting it in more than one way. Therefore, I don't have necessarily to comment on whether I agree with Mani Shankar Aiyar, or I don't agree. These are his views and not the views of the Government of India.

Q34: Sir , you are travelling to New York later this month, and you are good at economic diplomacy. Are you looking forward to political diplomacy in your first meeting with the Pakistan President, Pervez Musharraf, and if so, what is going to be your specific agenda?

PM: Well, my specific agenda is to normalise and expand our multi-faceted relationship to ensure that the two of us can work together to carry forward the peace process and carry forward the dialogue which, in due course of time, will yield constructive results.

Q35: Sir, I just want to know that आपसे ज्यादा कोई 'वूमैन पॉवर' को नहीं समझा पाया है। 'वूमैन पॉवर' के होते हुए भी 'वूमैन रिज़र्वेशन बिल' पास नहीं हो पाया और 'प्लेस' नहीं हो पाया। What do you want to say on that ?

PM: We are committed, as a Party, to legislate that one-third of seats in Parliament and in the State Legislatures are reserved for women. And, we have also said in the National Common Minimum Programme that we will

work to evolve a consensus to ensure that this becomes a reality.

Q36: Mr. PM, you are reputed to be a very honest man. Can I ask you an honest question? You never aspired to be the PM. After 100 days in office, are you enjoying the top job or is it too much of a burden?

PM: Well, it is a great honour and great privilege for me to be entrusted with this onerous responsibility. Of course, I was not an aspirant, but having been in this seat for more than 100 days, I, certainly consider it a great challenge, a great opportunity and a great honour to be in this seat.

Q37: Mr. PM, you just spoke about the need for peace and reconciliation in the South Asia, but our neighbourhood seems to be in a state of turmoil. Most of the countries have some problem or the other. Why is India not playing a more proactive role to assist these countries?

PM: I am sorry; I did not understand your question.

Q38: Why is India not playing a more proactive role to assist these countries?

PM: I think, we are playing, whatever we consider is a proper role in helping our friends in the neighbourhood to deal with their problems. We are in constant touch with the Government of Nepal, for example, to learn from them in what way we can be of help in dealing with the difficulties that they face.

In the same way, we have been in close contact with the Government of Sri Lanka. We are fully supportive of the peace process, which we hope will strengthen the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka, and, at the same time, I am sure that all legitimate aspirations of Tamils and other minorities are also

realised. So, it is not true to say that we are not active. But, I don't know when is one considered proactive or less active. These are adjectives whose meanings, I really don't understand.

Q39: वजीरे आजम साहब, मेरा सवाल आपसे है क्योंकि हिंदुस्तान में जो 'माइनॉरिटीज़' हैं, उनके लिए आपने, यू.पी.ए. गवर्नमेंट ने 'कॉमन मिनिमम प्रोग्राम' के अंदर उनके 'इकानॉमिकल' और 'ऐजुकेशनल डेवलपमेंट' के लिए 'स्कीमें ऐनाउंस' की थीं। आज आपकी सरकार के सौ दिन हो गए हैं और इन सौ दिनों के अंदर हमारी जो 'माइनॉरिटीज़' हैं, उनके लिए इन 'स्कीमों' पर क्या अमली जामा आप पहना रहे हैं और इसके लिए जो नया मंत्रालय आप खोलने की बात कर रहे हैं, वह कब तक करेंगे?

PM: Well, all promises that have been made are in various stages of implementation. Ministry of Human Resource Development has already taken some steps with regard to the minority educational institutions. There are other proposals in the Common Minimum Programme, the establishment of a Commission to look into the welfare of religious and linguistic minorities and to look into the prospects of their employment, including reservations. All these matters are receiving active attention of our Government.

Q40: Sir, you have just said a few minutes ago on your agenda - when you go to the U.S. You would see how the two nations would work to carry forward the peace process. I assume you are referring to the India-Pakistan peace process. Could you please spell out how exactly you mean to work together to carry forward the peace process?

PM: I think, this is not the proper forum for me to expand on that particular thing. This will be my first meeting with President Musharraf. It is essentially in the nature of mutual comprehension. And I do hope that we

can, both of us, work together to promote the process of normalisation of relationship between our two countries.

Q41: Your Government has taken a decision regarding the inquiry into the Godhra massacre, The BJP has recently accused the Government that there are two probes already going on on this massacre. What is going to be the use of the third probe? What is your comment?

PM: This particular Committee that is being set up by the Ministry of Railways will deal with those matters, which are exclusively the concerns of Railways with regard to matters relating to railway safety. Therefore, there is no contradiction between what the Commissions in existence are doing, and this new Committee. I am satisfied that this Committee will be doing things, which will not impinge on the work of the other Commissions.

Q42: Mr. PM, I would like to know your views on river linkage project. It is said that your Cabinet will discuss this issue this month. But before that I would like to know what do you think of its effects? What do you think about its cost of Rupees Five lakh crore? It is a huge project. What do you think of its effect in controlling drought and floods?

PM: The idea of linking river systems is not a new idea. I think this has been discussed and, in fact, included in Plan documents right from the early 1980s. What is going on are a number of feasibility studies. These feasibility studies have thrown up various issues, which need to be resolved, the ecological consequences, the economic cost, the economic benefits, I do not think, the proposals are in that stage where we can say that we are ready to take investment decisions. All these factors will have to be taken into account before we start implementing this project.

Q43: डा. साहब, आपने प्रधानमंत्री बनते ही सबसे पहले किसानों की हालत का जायजा लेने के लिए दौरा किया मगर अभी भी किसानों की आत्महत्या करने का क्रम जारी है। इसका एक कारण है, आपकी सरकार का साथ देने वाली 'लेफ्ट पार्टीज' यह कहती हैं कि आर्थिक सुधार है WTO, और जो दूसरे 'प्राइवेट' सूदखोर बाजार में आ गए हैं, जो किसानों को बड़ी ऊंची ब्याज पर पैसा देते हैं वे, और तीसरा बैंक है पैसों की जबरदस्ती वसूली करते हैं। मेरा निवेदन यह है कि आज की स्थिति में जो आपने आर्थिक सुधार लागू किए थे उनके अनेक फायदे दिख रहे हैं मगर किसान, मजदूर और साथ जो छोटे नौकरी-पेशा लोग हैं, उनकी आर्थिक स्थिति खराब होती जा रही है। मैं उम्मीद करता हूँ कि आप इस सवाल का जवाब हिंदी में देंगे क्योंकि किसानों से जुड़ा हुआ सवाल है?

PM : यह ठीक है कि पिछले पांच-छः सालों में, हमें किसानों की समस्याओं पर जितना ध्यान देना चाहिए था, वह नहीं दिया जा सका। हमारी यह कोशिश होगी कि किसानों को ज्यादा से ज्यादा सुविधाएं दी जाएं। आपने कर्ज के बारे में कहा है, इस साल हमने यह फैसला किया है 'इंस्टीट्यूशनल क्रेडिट' तकरीबन पिछले साल से तीस फीसदी बढ़ेगा क्योंकि तीन सालों में हम 'क्रेडिट फ्लो' को 'डबल', 200 परसेंट उसमें 'इन्क्रीज' लाएंगे। साथ ही साथ हमने यह भी कहा है कि जहां पर किसानों को ऋण वापस करने में दिक्कत हो रही है, उसके लिए 'री-शेड्यूलिंग एरेंजमेंट' भी होंगे तो यह कहना कि हमने कुछ किया नहीं है, यह ठीक नहीं होगा।

लेकिन मैं यह मानता हूँ कि ये जो समस्याएं हैं, यह बहुत दिनों से चल रही हैं। यह कहना कि हम थोड़े से समय में इनका हल निकाल सकते हैं - यह तो संभव नहीं होगा लेकिन इस संबंध में एक सिलसिला शुरू किया गया है। हम उसको 'ऐनलार्ज' करेंगे, 'इरीगेशन फेसिलिटीज' को बढ़ाएंगे, क्रेडिट फ्लो को बढ़ाएंगे और जहां कहीं भी 'रीशेड्यूलिंग' की जरूरत पड़ेगी, वहां भी हम उस पर पूरी तरह से गौर करेंगे।

Q44: Mr. PM, Sir, your C.M.P. promised to consider the demand for formation of a separate Telangana State. When are you going to do this?

PM: The Common Minimum Programme has already spelt out what we need to do in this regard. We need to consult all concerned. Proper consultations have to be carried out, I think, if we are to commit to the establishment of a separate State of Telangana.

Q45: आदरणीय मनमोहन सिंह जी को देश में आर्थिक सुधारों के लिए लोग याद रखते हैं और याद कर रहे हैं। बीच में एनडीए सरकार आयी। क्या आपको लगता है कि जो आर्थिक सुधार आपने उस समय लागू किए थे, उनको रोक दिया गया या आंशिक रूप से लागू किया गया? अब आप स्वयं प्रधानमंत्री हैं। क्या आप उन्हीं आर्थिक सुधारों को उसी रूप में लागू करेंगे या उसमें कुछ 'मॉडिफिकेशंस' करके उसको और अधिक विस्तृत रूप से लागू करने की कोशिश करेंगे?

PM: We are not dealing with the same situation as prevailed during 1991-96. We live in a dynamic world and, therefore, with the changing circumstances, policies have to be adjusted. I do feel that, while on the whole, the process that we had started in 1991 and which was continued by the succeeding regimes has yielded positive results. There are some problems. For example, agriculture has not received the attention that it deserves. Also, there are complaints that the benefits of growth have not filtered down to all sections of the society. So, there are problems. We need to strengthen the investment in agriculture. We need to pay a lot more attention on education and health. So, these are mid-term corrections, which we have to make if we have to gain widespread acceptability of the economic reform process.

Q46: महोदय, आपके प्रधानमंत्री बनने के बाद संसद सत्र में लगातार संसद में गतिरोध बरकरार रहा और अभी भी आशा की जा रही है कि संसद का जो सत्र होगा, उसमें गतिरोध बरकरार रहेगा - चाहे वह दागी मंत्रियों का मुद्दा हो, चाहे सावरकर का मामला हो। आपको नहीं लगता कि इन मामलों के कारण ही विपक्ष के नेता के नेतृत्व में जो प्रतिनिधि मंडल आपसे मिला था, उससे आम जनता में एक गलत 'मैसेज' गया कि प्रधानमंत्री के द्वारा गलत व्यवहार किया गया? मैं यह जानना चाहता हूँ कि पहले ही विपक्ष के नेता से इस संबंध में बात क्यों नहीं की जाती है जिससे कि संसद का सत्र सही ढंग से चले?

PM: There has been no effort on our part to block any discussion with the Leader of the Opposition. I think the impression that somehow we are not amenable to reason, that we do not want to talk to the leaders of the Opposition is totally incorrect. As far as this specific incident is concerned,

I think, that is now a closed chapter and I do not wish to dwell on it any further.

Q47: सर, अभी हाल में ही एक सर्कुलर जारी किया गया जिसमें कहा गया कि जितने मंत्री हैं, उनके पीएस, पत्रकारों से सीधे बात न करें। क्या आज की बात के बाद आप उस 'सर्कुलर' को वापिस करवाएंगे?

PM: I am not aware of any such circular. I will have to see it before I can comment on it.

Q48: महोदय, जिस प्रकार मणिपुर ने हाल में केन्द्र की सलाह के विपरीत फैसला लिया। जिस प्रकार पंजाब सरकार ने केन्द्र को नज़रअंदाज करके फैसला लिया, उसके चलते आप केन्द्र सरकार के वर्चस्व और हमारे संघीय ढांचे को कितना खतरा देखते हैं और केन्द्र राज्य संबंधों पर इसका क्या असर पड़ेगा?

PM: No doubt, there are problems. But I am confident that our economy, our polity is resilient enough to deal with these issues. Therefore, one should not read too much into what has happened. Such issues have always been of a sensitive nature, of a delicate nature. It is not for the first time that something has happened. In 1991, for example, in Karnataka, a similar situation arose. The Karnataka Government came with an Ordinance, relating to the Cauvery waters. That Ordinance was, then, referred to the Supreme Court for its advisory opinion. The Supreme Court gave an opinion that this legislation was inconsistent with the normal legal processes. Therefore, that was the end of it.

I am quite sure, when the Supreme Court's advisory opinion is given with regard to the Punjab Legislation, necessary correctives will be set in motion. With regard to Manipur, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act was enforced in Manipur by an explicit decision of the Government of Manipur. That Government has the right to revoke it; that Government has the right also to modify it. And, what they have done is a slight modification that this Act will not imply to Imphal East and Imphal West districts. The Act is still

applicable in the rest of the State. And let me say that the Government of Manipur is grappling with a very difficult situation with commendable restraint, with a commendable firmness. They deserve our sympathy and support.

Q49: प्रधान मंत्री जी, भारत सरकार की तरफ से भी और पाकिस्तान की तरफ से भी दोनों देशों के बीच में संबंधों के सुधार की बात की जा रही है और विदेश मंत्री के 'लेवल' पर भी बातचीत हो रही है, लेकिन भारत का 'स्टैंड' था कि जब सीमा पार से घुसपैठ और आतंकवाद खत्म होगा और उस चीज़ को हम बराबर उठाते रहेंगे, तो क्या भारत ने उस 'ईश्यू' को छोड़ दिया है और आपकी नज़र में क्या कश्मीर में सीमा पार से घुसपैठ बंद हो गई है और आतंकवाद में कमी आई है?

PM: Our view is that the starting point of this whole dialogue process was the statement of President Musharraf in January, 2004 that Pakistan's territory will not be used to provide any encouragement to acts of terrorism. The dialogue can move forward only if terrorism is brought under control. There was, I think, considerable deceleration in the flow of infiltration. There has, however, been some increase in recent weeks. All these matters would be discussed with the authorities of Pakistan when the meeting takes place. We continue to be concerned about the infiltration. We continue to believe that if processes of reconciliation they have to move forward, there must be an honest effort on the part of all concerned to implement what was promised in January 2004 statement.

Q50: डाक्टर साहब, अमूमन सभी 'प्राइम मिनिस्टर' लोक सभा के रास्ते से 'प्राइम मिनिस्टर' की कुर्सी तक पहुंचते हैं। क्या लोक सभा इलेक्शन लड़ने का आपका इरादा है और क्या असम या पंजाब के 'चीफ मिनिस्टर' ने इस बारे में आपको कोई पेशकश की है?

PM: It is not true that all the PMs have been from the Lok Sabha. Shri Deve Gowda and Shri Gujral have been from the Rajya Sabha. I have not applied my mind to the issue that you have raised.

Q51: Mr. PM, it is being said in certain quarters that the threat to Dr. Manmohan Singh comes not from the Left or from the Opposition, but from Dr. Manmohan Singh himself and that if you are pushed against the wall and compelled to do things that go against your grain in the course of keeping the coalition together, you might just decide to put in your papers. Could such a thing happen?

PM: Well, Madam, I believe our Government is going to last for full five years, and let there be no doubt, or, ambiguity about this. Therefore, this misconception that I can be pressurised into giving up is simply not going to materialise.

Media Advisor: Ladies and Gentlemen, I am sure you will all agree that this is a brilliant note to end this session. I am sure, all of you have lots of questions. Please bear with me. Another opportunity will come by. You have been very graceful and extremely polite and thank you very, very much.

Thank you, Sir.

PM's opening statement at his first National Press Conference

Friends,

Good evening. It gives me great pleasure to be here with you this evening. Ever since we came into Government I have been keen to meet with you.

Many of you have sought appointments for interviews but I was unable to respond partly due to my busy work schedule and partly because Parliament was in session. I am delighted to be able to meet all of you here this evening. I wish you all well and, through you I wish to convey my best wishes to each and every citizen of our country.

I have had the opportunity to share my thoughts on some issues of national concern with the people of our country on more than one occasion in recent weeks. However, I still regret the fact that I couldn't do so in Parliament while conveying my government's gratitude to the Rashtrapathi for his Inaugural Address. I do sincerely hope such a situation will not arise again and Parliament is able to function normally in future.

The past three months have been rather unusual. A new government is normally granted what you in the media call a "honeymoon period" of settling down to work. Unfortunately, I have not been granted that indulgence and we have had to hit the ground running. As I look back on these three months I can confidently say that despite this rough start, our government has started translating the mandate and the message of the 2004 elections into policies and programmes.

What is that mandate and what was the message? The people of India voted decisively against the National Democratic Alliance and in favour of an alternative government. A government committed to secularism and that believes in fostering an inclusive society. The United Progressive Alliance was a natural product of that mandate and reflects the preference of the overwhelming majority of the electorate. The National Common Minimum

Programme of the U.P.A. will be the guiding framework for Government policy.

Our Government's objective is clear: The country must forge ahead with a higher rate of economic growth, but that growth process must generate more employment, must be equitable, socially just and humane. Agriculture and our farmers must receive more focused attention. India must shine for the poor, it must shine for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, other backward classes and Minorities. India must shine in the cities and the villages. **We want India to shine, and shine for all.**

I believe we have already initiated a clear shift in the direction of our policies to this end. Though we did not get enough time to draft the Union Budget, and we have only half the financial year left, we have initiated some important changes in the direction of economic policy. Next week I will be chairing a full meeting of the Planning Commission where a concrete shape will be given to the implementation of many assurances given in the NCMP. **The Planning Commission has been re-energised as an active instrument of development policy**, with a special focus on infrastructure. Many of the initiatives suggested in the NCMP have already been taken up for implementation. Important Commissions and Committees promised in the NCMP are being constituted.

Inflation has caused some concern. But, I assure you that despite increasing world oil prices, a delayed arrival of the monsoon and avoidable disruptions caused by such actions as the truckers' strike we shall be able to

control inflationary pressures. **We shall take firm measures to check inflation without hurting the growth process.**

The security situation in the country has been a cause for concern for some time now. Our government is committed to dealing effectively with the internal security challenges. We would, however, do so in a humane and compassionate manner and in keeping with democratic traditions. We will not compromise with militancy and violence, but we are ready to talk to any and all disaffected groups, whether in Jammu and Kashmir, in the North-Eastern States, or elsewhere. We are not laying down any pre-conditions, but expect that those who resort to militancy should eschew the path of violence, and stop the killing of innocent citizens. I will be visiting Jammu & Kashmir shortly.

I must pay tribute to the disciplined and patient manner in which the armed forces have answered the call of duty, having been drawn into internal security duty. We must create an environment in which our police and para military forces can deal effectively with the law and order situation. For this, it is necessary to restructure and revitalize these forces. At the same time, we have to reform our development administration to tackle the problem of poverty and unemployment at their roots; particularly in Jammu & Kashmir and the States of the North East.

Our government is alive to the sentiments and concerns of the people of Jammu and Kashmir and the North-East and will do the utmost to guarantee a life of dignity and self-respect of every citizen. We will take measures to accelerate the tempo of development.

Vis-à-vis Pakistan, we have consistently declared our commitment to the peace process and to carrying forward the dialogue process. **Our approach to talks will be based on realism and the belief that the people of South Asia are bound together by a shared destiny. It is not in my nature to promise a false dawn but I do believe in the ancient saying that ‘a road is made by walking’, step by step.**

We will continue to strengthen strategic and political equations with the United States and Russian Federation. We shall move forward on resolving the boundary issue with China and fashion a stable cooperative relationship with that country.

It is my expectation that the agreements relating to the first phase of the Next Steps In Strategic Partnership (NSSP) with the United States would be finalized soon as the Foreign Secretary is visiting Washington DC in the coming fortnight for final negotiations on this subject. This will enable closer bilateral cooperation in the areas of science and technology and space exploration.

I have repeatedly emphasized the importance of reforming government and improving governance in the country. This is not a partisan or a party political agenda.

I have sought a national consensus on a code of conduct, a code of ethics and a code of best practices in government. This is in the national interest. Whether in accelerating the rate of economic growth or dealing with law and

order and the internal security challenge, the real task at hand is to reform the three arms of governance - the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. Major political parties are today in government in one state or another. Whatever our political differences, all of us have a shared interest and a joint stake in improving the effectiveness and efficiency of government.

We will convene an all-party conference on electoral reform to forge a consensus on all aspects of electoral reform, including criminalization of political processes. This malady must be nipped in the bud, at the electoral stage, if we seriously wish to deal with its consequences for governance.

Friends,

I have only one sincere request to make of you. While pursuing your desire to grab headlines and seek sound bytes, under the pressure of professional and commercial competition and in the daily race for racy news, please keep the national interest uppermost in your mind. We are in a race against time to improve the quality of life of a billion people, to regain for our ancient land its rightful glory. This national endeavour should not be hurt by petty and divisive politics.

Elections are the correct instruments for change of governments in a democracy. Once an election is over and the results are in, a government is formed. The parties in power and those in opposition must then work for the welfare of the people.

The Opposition political parties are adversaries in polls, but partners in progress. In fact, today the same party is in power in one state and in opposition in another. This must make all of us more responsible, not more contentious. Every political party has a right to seek power, but once the people's verdict is in, the winner must govern. This is the sacred responsibility the electorate has given us, and we will fulfill it.

Thank you.