

SPEECH OF PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE AT THE BANQUET HOSTED IN HONOUR OF THE PRESIDENT OF FRENCH REPUBLIC, H.E. MR. FRANCOIS HOLLANDE

Rashtrapati Bhavan, New Delhi : 25.01.2016

Your Excellency President Francois Hollande,

Distinguished members of the delegations of India and France, Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

President Hollande, I am delighted to welcome you and the esteemed members of your delegation to India on this very special occasion, which is historic in many ways. Tomorrow, when you preside as the Chief Guest of India's 67th Republic Day celebrations, France will make history as the only country to have been accorded this honour a fifth time. When your distinguished French Infantry troops march in step with Indian troops in the parade tomorrow, they will make history yet again by being the first-ever foreign contingent to do so. I recall with great pleasure, my meeting with you here, three years ago, and feel privileged to welcome you back in India once again – this time as the Chief Guest of our Republic Day celebration.

For me, this is not just history in the making – it is a testimony to the enduring bonds between our two civilisations and our two people; it is a tribute to our long-standing and strategic partnerships. It is emblematic of our two national mottos: "*Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*" and "*Satyameva Jayate*", coming together, with the power to inspire the world to achieve the universal ideals of peace and justice.

Excellency, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The friendship between India and France is driven by a remarkable similarity in the ideals and aspirations of our people. Our civilizations have interacted with each other over the centuries, united by a shared vision of the world we want to live in - a world that is premised on individual liberty, freedom and equality; a world that respects pluralism and democracy; a world that seeks tolerance and peaceful co-existence. The deep bonds of our time-tested friendship are only set to strengthen in the years ahead, anchored as they are in this rich, unshakeable foundation.

Today, France is India's leading partner in strategic sectors like defence, space and civil-nuclear cooperation. While our partnership in defence is several decades old; I am happy that our ties are being further strengthened with the robust participation of French private enterprises in 'Make in India' initiative through joint ventures in defence production and manufacturing.

Our rich cooperation in the space sector is now five decades old and is increasingly contributing to the world's understanding of our planetary resources, our ability to fight climate change and fathom the unexplored mysteries of space. France is also a key partner in our quest for harnessing nuclear energy to provide reliable and affordable energy for all.

While our cooperation in science and research, education, culture and health is growing, I am glad that the Government of France and the captains of French industry are actively partnering India in our ambitious developmental initiatives, infrastructure, smart cities, clean energy, railways and skill development.

Excellency, I am glad that you started your visit to India in Chandigarh, a city that is a monument to the genius of Le Corbusier. The unveiling yesterday of the historic findings of an Indo-French archaeological team dating back to 2.6 million years and the proposed Indo-French partnership in Mars exploration, juxtapose the incredible breadth of our partnership - from jointly plumbing the depths of history to joining hands to explore the stars and the skies.

Mr. President, Chandigarh is also the capital of Punjab and Haryana, a region from where more than a century ago, thousands of Indian soldiers fought France's battle during the First World War and close to ten thousand of them today lie buried in scattered cemeteries in France, having made the supreme sacrifice for the freedom of France.

As we did then, so must our two countries fight resolutely now for freedom from the forces of intolerance, extremism and terrorism. The dastardly terror attacks in Paris and Pathankot have underlined the urgency for countries like ours to combat this existential threat to humanity and human civilisation.

We also need to combat the shared challenge of climate change. Excellency, we laud your leadership and commitment in forging the Paris Agreement on climate change which paves the way for our collective endeavour to safeguard our planet for future generations. We must now ensure that the world walks the path of sustainable development through sustainable lifestyles.

Excellency, we have begun the New Year with fresh hopes and dreams and a resolve to jointly overcome the challenges facing us. We live in difficult times characterized by violence, fundamentalism and inequality. But we also live in times of brilliant innovation, of great creativity, of unparalleled global interaction. I am confident that your visit heralds new beginnings in scaling new heights in our bilateral relationship and in our common quest for peace, stability and prosperity for all.

With these words, ladies and gentleman, may I raise a toast to the friendship that has always existed between the peoples of India and France and to ever closer cooperation between our two countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I invite you to please join me in raising a toast:

-to the good health of His Excellency President Francois Hollande;

-to the continued progress, prosperity and well-being of the friendly people of France; and

-to the lasting friendship between our two peoples and countries

Vive La France and Jai Hind!