

ADDRESS TO PARLIAMENT—23 FEBRUARY 2000

Lok Sabha	—	Thirteenth Lok Sabha
Session	—	First Session of the Year
President of India	—	Shri K. R. Narayanan
Vice-President of India	—	Shri Krishan Kant
Prime Minister of India	—	Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee
Speaker, Lok Sabha	—	Shri G.M.C. Balayogi

HONOURABLE MEMBERS,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the first session of Parliament in the year 2000. I felicitate the Members and extend to all of you my best wishes for the successful completion of the budgetary and legislative business that lies ahead.

Last month India completed fifty years as a Republic. It was a proud moment in the history of this ancient civilization, which re-emerged as a free and democratic nation in the modern era. For all of us, the last fifty years have been a period of triumph and tribulation, of achievement and shortfalls. The Golden Jubilee of our Republic is, hence, an occasion for both celebration and reflection.

If the global march of democracy was the hallmark of the 20th Century, India has won worthy laurels for not only being the largest democracy in the world, but also zealously preserving it against all odds. The entire world looks to India with hope and expectation. Our founding fathers did their duty by giving us a great Republican Constitution. It is now our responsibility to transform our democracy into an effective instrument for the economic, social and cultural development of every Indian. As the Father of the Nation always exhorted us during our struggle for freedom, we must ensure that the first claim on the fruits of development belongs to the poor and the weak.

The Constitution, which India adopted fifty years ago, has served us well. It has been a reliable guarantor of parliamentary democracy, secularism and fundamental rights, which all of us cherish. It has also inspired the spread of democratic consciousness in our society, empowering dalits, adivasis, backward classes and women and making our system of governance

more participative and progressive. While keeping the basic structure and salient features of the Constitution inviolate, it has, however, become necessary to examine the experience of the past fifty years to better achieve the ideals enshrined in the Constitution. The Government has, therefore, set up a broad-based Constitution Review Commission. The recommendations of this Commission will be presented before Parliament, which is the supreme decision-making body in Indian democracy.

India has undoubtedly had many spectacular achievements in the past five decades. There is no other experiment in human history where a billion people, belonging to so many different traditions, are living and striving together for a better life without being denied their rights and freedoms. We cannot, however, be satisfied with this alone. As the experience of the many newly-independent and developing nations has shown, fifty years is a long time to achieve all-round progress for all. If the first half-century of our Republic makes any demand on us, it is simply this: we must lose no more time to eradicate mass poverty, remove illiteracy and assure basic minimum services to all our fellow citizens. While accomplishing this historic task, we must simultaneously strengthen social justice, promote gender justice, remove regional imbalances and bridge the rural-urban divide.

India cannot achieve the strength and prosperity that we all desire, and that our country is capable of, if vast areas and large sections of our population remain deprived and poor. Faster economic growth is a precondition for removing social and regional imbalances in development. The economic reforms started in the beginning of the last decade, with the express intention of accelerating economic growth, were a historical necessity. The shortcomings that have crept into our development process over the decades needed to be removed. It is a matter of pride and satisfaction that our country has implemented these reforms without social unrest and with a high degree of political consensus. These reforms are now yielding desired results in several areas. The sustainable rate of growth of our economy has increased. Our industry and financial system have become stronger and more competitive.

The Government is committed to accelerating the pace of economic reforms and to broadening their scope. At the same time, we shall make conscious and concerted efforts to bring the fruits of economic reforms to those regions and communities that have so far not benefited from them. The approach to India's economic development may have changed in the past ten years, but the goals of equity and social justice have not. We shall re-double our efforts to ensure that the poor and the deprived have an even greater stake in economic reforms than at present. We realize that this is essential for mobilizing people's enthusiastic participation in the development process.

The “Agenda for a Proud, Prosperous India”, which is the common policy document of the Government of the National Democratic Alliance, provides the framework for faster development with equity and employment. The Government’s record of speeding up the work of taking decisions on policy issues and the passage of pending legislation shows its determination to fulfil the promises made in this Agenda. The Government will continue to vigorously pursue a coherent plan of economic reforms. These reforms will cover agriculture, industry, public enterprises, fiscal consolidation and devolution, tax reform, financial sector reform and foreign investment policies. Most importantly, they will also cover policies for improving the performance of key infrastructure sectors, namely, power, roads, railways, ports, civil aviation, telecommunications and petroleum.

We are primarily a rural nation and most of our people depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Therefore, development of agriculture, particularly in the rainfed and drought-prone areas where poverty is extreme, shall be accorded high priority. This would call for substantial capital formation in agriculture and investment in the areas where productivity has been relatively low. As the agriculture sector still employs about two-thirds of our total workforce, greater investment in agriculture, including agri-businesses would be mobilized to enhance employment opportunities and create greater prosperity in rural areas. The Government will shortly finalize the National Agriculture Policy to address these issues.

At present, the programmes relating to conservation, development and management of land resources are scattered in different Ministries and Departments in the Central Government. There is an imperative need to put in place an integrated mechanism capable of responding effectively to the challenges of managing our scarce land resources—especially those arising from globalization, liberalization and privatization. The Government will therefore, bring all the programmes and schemes as well as the institutional infrastructure relating to land in rural areas, under the control of the newly created Department of Land Resources in the Ministry of Rural Development.

Special programmes for the generation of productive wage employment in the rural areas, especially for creating permanent infrastructure assets and self-employment opportunities for the unemployed youth will be given greater thrust. The Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana, the Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana and the restructured Employment Assurance Scheme will be vigorously implemented and closely monitored.

The process of urbanization has led to a rapid rise in the proportion of Indians living in cities and towns. Sadly, the rate of growth of urban infrastructure and civic amenities has not matched the explosion of our urban population. The Government realizes that urban renewal is critical

to the emergence of a new and resurgent India. This calls for a better coordination among the Centre, States and municipal authorities to effectively implement the policies and programmes on urban employment, housing construction, transportation and other utilities. The Government will facilitate increased public and private investment in the development of physical and social infrastructure, with an emphasis on improving the living conditions of the urban poor. It will also step up efforts to promote good municipal governance.

Our nation's future lies with our children and youth. The Government will soon set up a National Commission on Children to promote and channel all the efforts in the government and non-government sectors to achieve their all-round development and to unleash their creative energies both now and when they grow up. All existing programmes for sports and youth affairs will be reviewed and re-activated to give effect to our resolve to encourage physical, social and cultural development of our young men and women.

A decision has been taken to launch Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan to ensure that every child in the age group of six to fourteen goes to a school, or an Education Guarantee Centre, or a "Back to School Camp" by 2003. We shall intensify efforts to involve the non-governmental sector in higher and technical education. The Government proposes to come out with a policy that would fully incorporate non-governmental efforts within the national endeavour to provide Education For All.

Women constitute half of the Indian population but their status in our society is poor. They are largely excluded from decision-making in public life. No nation can progress unless its women enjoy good health, are literate and are equal partners with men in the socio-economic and political processes. Our Constitution guarantees equality and non-discrimination between men and women and we are committed to achieving this objective. The Constitution (85th Amendment) Bill, 1999, seeking to provide reservation of not less than one-third of the seats for women in the Lok Sabha and in Legislative Assemblies of States, was introduced in the Lok Sabha during the last session. The Department of Women and Child Development will also soon finalize a National Policy for Empowerment of Women, which aims to mainstream gender into laws, policies, programmes and budgetary allocations of the Government. The Indira Mahila Yojana will be made more effective and expanded to 450 more blocks.

India has one of the largest populations of older people in the world. In recent times, there has been a withering away of the joint family system, which has exposed elderly people to emotional neglect and a lack of physical support. The Government has formulated a National Policy on Older Persons and has established a National Council for Older Persons to

focus on problems faced by our senior citizens. An Expert Committee has recently submitted a report on a proposed pension scheme for old age security, which is being examined by the Government. A decision will be taken on this scheme shortly.

When I last addressed both Houses of Parliament on October 25, 1999, I had taken the opportunity to lay before you the medium-term economic agenda of the Government. Since then, the economic data suggests a distinct upturn in the economy. Economic growth in 1999-2000 is expected to be around 6 per cent. Inflation has also remained well under control during the current fiscal 1999-2000. Our foreign currency reserves at over US\$ 32 billion are also comfortable. There has been a general upward trend in stock indices, primarily due to the revival in the industrial sector. To build on these clear economic strengths, we must seize the opportunity to deepen and accelerate the reform process.

I am happy to say that the Government has begun to implement the medium-term economic agenda outlined by me in my last address to Parliament. I will briefly dwell on some of these issues:—

- (a) The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Amendment) Ordinance, 2000 was promulgated to strengthen the TRAI. This will remove many hurdles in the path of speedy development of telecom services, increase investor confidence and create a level playing field between public and private operators. The corresponding Bill will be brought before Parliament in its current session.
- (b) A Group of Experts has been constituted to recommend a new legislation reflecting the phenomenon of the Convergence of IT, Telecom and TV in place of the Indian Telegraph Act, 1885.
- (c) The Government has already initiated a major programme of road construction to be called the National Highway Development Project consisting of the Golden Quadrilateral and the East-West, North-South Corridors costing Rs. 54,000 crore. We will ensure the speedy implementation of this vitally needed highway network.
- (d) The Government is carrying forward the restructuring and reform process in the power sector. Emphasis has been given on development of hydel power, particularly in the North-Eastern parts of the country. The national power grid will be strengthened to facilitate efficient inter-regional power flows.
- (e) In the petroleum sector, under the New Exploration Licensing Policy, 25 blocks have been awarded in a record time, thereby accelerating domestic exploration efforts. The Group on India Hydrocarbon Vision-2025 has also finalized its recommendations and the Government will initiate early action to implement them.

- (f) A Bill to amend the Coal Mines (Nationalization) Act, 1973 will be introduced in the current session of Parliament to allow Indian companies in the private sector to undertake coal mining.
- (g) It has been decided to enable private participation in the airport sector through long-term leasing of airports. The existing airports of Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Calcutta* will be given out on long-term lease basis while a new international airport at Bangalore® will be developed as a greenfield venture with private sector participation. This will go a long way in improving the airport infrastructure and the functioning of our airports to world class levels.
- (h) The Government has also decided to take innovative steps to bring about a major improvement in the working of our ports and to develop other efficient and modern port facilities with greater private sector participation.
- (i) The Information Technology Bill, 1999 to promote E-Commerce was introduced in the Lok Sabha in its last session.
- (j) A National Venture Capital Fund of Rs. 100 crore for promoting new Information Technology businesses by promising entrepreneurs has been launched. Guidelines to allow acquisition of foreign companies abroad by Indian IT companies have been liberalized. To accelerate the growth of high-speed Internet services in the country, a liberal policy for setting up international gateways and use of foreign satellites for greater bandwidth has been put in place. Further measures will soon be taken to promote the spread of the Internet and telecom services, especially in rural and backward areas.
- (k) The Ministry of Information Technology is taking further initiatives to promote the development of the IT industry in the country. These include the proposal to establish the “India IT and Software Brand Equity Fund”, facilitate greater usage of IT for increasing productivity in small and medium enterprises, developing Indian initiatives in E-Commerce and setting up IT-enabled services and distance education programmes.
- (l) The Insurance Regulation and Development Authority Act was passed by Parliament in its last session. This will enable participation by private Indian companies in the insurance sector leading to better service to customers, as well as mobilization of larger long-term investment for faster economic development.
- (m) The Government has reviewed and recast the Foreign Direct Investment regime, ensuring an automatic route for FDI clearances

* Now known as Kolkata.

® Now known as Bengaluru.

except in a small list of carefully chosen areas. This will bring in greater transparency, cut delays and create an enabling framework to ensure FDI inflow of at least \$ 10 billion a year.

- (n) The Debt Recovery Tribunal Act has been amended by an Ordinance. It is one of the crucial measures underpinning financial sector reforms. The corresponding Bill for replacement of the Ordinance by an Act will be introduced in Parliament in the current session.
- (o) The Second Labour Commission has been constituted to suggest changes in various labour laws in order to achieve the goals of labour welfare, generation of additional employment, higher investment and accelerated industrial growth.
- (p) A major milestone in tax reforms was achieved with the introduction of a uniform rate of sales tax throughout the country from January 1, 2000. This was made possible by close co-operation between the Centre and the States. As a progressive step towards further tax rationalisation, the States have also decided to move over to a Value-Added Tax (VAT) regime with effect from April 1, 2001.
- (q) A large number of outdated or inessential laws and regulations have been removed from the statute book. This is a part of the Government's continuing effort to speed up much-needed legal reforms.

However, the growing fiscal deficit continues to be an area of considerable concern. This is undoubtedly the most challenging macro-economic management problem faced by us. The deficit reduces public investment, crowds out private investment, raises interest rates and generates inflationary pressure. The burden of interest payments continues to be large at above 4 per cent of GDP, accounting for about two-thirds of tax revenue of the Central Government net of States' share. As the interest burden on Government borrowing increases, it limits the ability of the Government to expand health and education services and anti-poverty programmes. Subsidies on non-merit goods which are currently very high, have to be brought down and phased out.

For India to sustain accelerated growth with high employment coupled with modest inflation, the growing fiscal deficit needs to be contained. We have to adopt measures to curb the rising trend of Non-Plan Expenditure. These require difficult decisions relating to the quality of Government expenditure, downsizing the Government, recovery of economic cost for goods and services and greater austerity in Government spending. The programme of disinvestment and restructuring of Public Sector Undertakings also needs to be accelerated. Our tax system must be modernized for

improving the Tax-to-GDP ratio. If we achieve fiscal consolidation, then given our stable macro framework, India can truly hope to achieve growth rates of well over 7 per cent in the coming years. If sacrifices have to be made for achieving this challenging goal, they are well-worth making because the long-term rewards of restructuring will benefit all Indians and will far outweigh the temporary costs.

The financial condition of the States is also very worrisome. State Government finances have shown signs of rapid deterioration in the nineties. The year 1998-99 witnessed a very high gross fiscal deficit of States amounting to more than Rs. 75,000 crores, touching a level of 4.3 per cent of GDP. This is, indeed, an unsustainable situation. The deteriorating trend in the fiscal position of State Governments needs to be urgently reversed. The Central Government has, therefore, initiated necessary measures in consultation with the States, to seek policy reforms aimed at fiscal correction and consolidation to bring about long-term sustainability of the fiscal position of the States.

The Government is committed to the speedy economic development of the North-Eastern States. The North-Eastern Council is being expanded to include Sikkim and we shall strive to make it an effective agency for accelerated development of these States. In a meeting last month at Shillong, the Prime Minister, accompanied by the Home Minister, Defence Minister, Finance Minister and the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, reviewed development and security issues with the Governors and Chief Ministers of the North-Eastern States and Sikkim. All assistance is being provided to those North-Eastern States that are affected by terrorism and anti-social activities.

The Government has announced an ambitious programme of over Rs. 10,200 crores for the socio-economic development of the North-Eastern States and Sikkim. This programme includes new initiatives in industry, health, education and security. It will also give a major impetus to infrastructure development in the region, especially power, roads, railways, airports and telecommunications. An important objective of this initiative is to create large-scale local employment. Trade with neighbouring countries is also going to be a thrust area for development of this region.

The super-cyclone that struck Orissa in end October caused the death of thousands of people and devastated the social and economic life of a large section of the State's population. The entire country participated generously in supplementing the Government's efforts to mobilize relief and rehabilitation for the affected people. We express our appreciation for the excellent work done by the armed and paramilitary forces, the meteorological department, the Railways, port authorities, other government departments and agencies like the Food Corporation of India, the relief

teams sent by State Governments as well as non-governmental and charitable organizations. To minimize the effects of natural calamities, the Government has set up a high-powered committee to prepare a Natural Disaster Management Plan. This will review existing arrangements for preparedness for natural disasters and their mitigation. It will recommend measures for strengthening of organizational structures and formulate a comprehensive model plan for natural disaster management at the national, state and district levels.

In the global context we shall continue to work for the establishment of a rule based, non-discriminatory multilateral trading system, which is fair and equitable to all nations. As a founder member of the GATT and the WTO, India has been an active participant in all the previous international trade negotiations and in all the three WTO ministerial meetings. India has always pursued its mission for greater equity and symmetry in trade relations and for avoidance of linkage of trade with extraneous issues. Economic integration cannot advance if the interests of the poor are ignored. As a developing country, India is sensitizing other member nations to this reality. We would continue to persevere for equitable implementation of the provisions of the Uruguay Round negotiations.

In the months following the military coup in Pakistan, there has been a marked increase in Pakistan-sponsored cross-border terrorism, targeted especially at our security forces. There has also been an increase in Pakistani firing across the border. These developments underline the need for constant vigil by our defence forces. However, the threat of terrorist attacks is one that affects all Indian citizens. We must, as a people, become more security-conscious in the face of the unremitting terror campaign against our country. For its part, the Government is fully alert to all threats to India's external and internal security. We are prepared to meet any challenge to our territorial integrity and to our open, democratic way of life.

I salute the brave jawans and officers of the Indian Army who are standing guard along the LoC in the Kargil and other sectors, far from their families and loved ones. It is a tribute to the courage, determination and dedication of our forces that they have withstood freezing temperatures of minus 40 degrees celsius and below and the hardship of patrolling snow-bound heights. It is due to the valour and skill of our soldiers that our frontiers are secure from enemy forces.

The Subrahmanyam Committee, appointed by the Government to inquire into the events and circumstances that formed the backdrop to Pakistan's armed incursion into Kargil and other parts of the LoC, has submitted its report. This will be tabled in Parliament during this session. The Government is committed to take all necessary follow-up measures after a thorough scrutiny of the committee's recommendations.

Backing up our soldiers are our defence scientists and defence production units. I am happy to inform the Honourable Members that, since I last addressed both Houses of Parliament, our defence scientists have added two major successes to their list of achievements. The short-range, quick-reaction-time surface-to-air missile, Trishul, has been successfully tested. The remote-controlled Nishant has been successfully flight tested. Our defence production units have proved their capability to produce sophisticated defence equipment. Production in ordnance factories in the first nine months has been higher by 33 per cent, compared to the corresponding period last year.

The overall law and order situation in the country has remained satisfactory except in certain areas affected by Pakistan-sponsored terrorist and separatist activities. Terrorist violence has been most pronounced in Jammu and Kashmir, especially after Pakistan's defeat in Kargil and the military coup in Islamabad. Government, both at the Centre and in the State, has met the challenge posed by Pakistan-backed terrorists and foreign mercenaries with determination. We are continuing with our four-pronged strategy to counter terrorist and separatist violence in Jammu and Kashmir by deepening of the democratic process, accelerating economic development, isolating foreign mercenaries and terrorists and playing a pro-active role to neutralize them. Apart from strengthening and modernizing the Jammu and Kashmir police, Government has been reimbursing the State's security related expenditure and providing financial support over and above the normal Plan assistance. I acknowledge the invaluable contribution of our armed forces, paramilitary forces and police personnel in combating terrorism and extremism in Jammu and Kashmir and some other parts of the country.

The Government is fully committed to preserving and further strengthening the secular ethos of our country. Communal harmony in the country has improved remarkably in the past few years. The last two years have been largely free of communal violence. In 1999, this trend gathered speed with the number of communal incidents declining by 10 per cent, the number of people killed by 32 per cent and the number of injured by 11 per cent.

The Government stands by its promise to create the States of Uttaranchal*, Vananchal and Chhattisgarh. Bills for this purpose are being referred to the concerned State legislatures for their views.

The Inter-State Council has been reconstituted. Based on the experience of its working in the past, the Government will make it an effective platform for further harmonizing the relations between the Centre and the States and among the States themselves.

Our space programme continues to forge ahead in establishing systems that are crucial for telecommunications, broadcasting, meteorology, disaster warning and management of natural resources. India has established

* Now known as Uttarakhand.

indigenous capability to launch Indian remote sensing satellites into the required polar sun-synchronous orbit. We are now well on our way to develop the geo-synchronous satellite launch vehicle. The INSAT system is one of the largest domestic satellite systems in the world and the next satellite in this system, INSAT-3B, is awaiting launch. It is scheduled to be commissioned in March-April 2000.

The Government continues to pursue its policy of harnessing nuclear energy for peaceful purposes for the welfare of the people. All nuclear plants have been operating smoothly and their average capacity factor has increased from 75 per cent to 78 per cent. India's eleventh nuclear power reactor at Kaiga in Karnataka achieved first criticality on September 21, 1999 and has been connected to the grid. The twelfth nuclear power reactor at Rawatbhatta in Rajasthan achieved first criticality on December 24, 1999.

The Government is fully committed to support science and technology in the interests of national development and national security. However, a serious concern that needs addressing is that not enough young men and women are taking up careers in research and development. The Government is committed to reversing this trend by guaranteeing our highly talented young persons an attractive career profile, so that they can produce world-class scientific research and technological development while living and working in India.

The Government is committed to rapidly moving towards electronic governance, which will ensure better citizen-Government interface and greater transparency. In order to increase accessibility to and application of, computers, the Government has intensified efforts in developing and promoting software for popular applications in Indian languages. I am happy that many State Governments have also taken major steps to complement the Centre's thrust to make India a front-runner in the IT revolution.

India's foreign policy of Non-Alignment and peaceful co-existence is relevant to the multi-polar world of today. This is based on the principle of protecting our vital interests and promoting our national ideals. The Government continues to pursue the policy of continuously expanding and deepening its friendly, close, wide-ranging and constructive relations with our neighbouring countries—Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Maldives and Bhutan. Regular interaction with these countries has contributed to further strengthening of ties and mutual appreciation of each other's interests, sensitivities and concerns.

However, Pakistan has shown no inclination to end its policy of aiding and abetting cross-border terrorism and its hostile anti-India propaganda. Pakistan's role in acts of terror has been recently underscored by the hijacking of the Indian Airlines flight from Kathmandu. Irrefutable evidence

has been provided by the Government about the Pakistani origins of the hijackers as well as the role of Pakistani officials posted in Kathmandu. We sincerely hope that Pakistan will reverse this policy of hostility towards India so that normal relations could be restored.

The return of peace and tranquillity in Afghanistan is important for the stability of our region. It is also necessary for curbing narco-terrorism. Above all, it is needed for the people of Afghanistan with whom we have age-old ties. It is only through the setting up of a broad-based Government in Kabul, truly representative of all ethnic groups and the cessation of Pakistan's interference, that peace can be restored in Afghanistan.

We shall continue to deepen and broaden our relations with our extended neighbourhood of Central Asia, West Asia, the Gulf and the Asia-Pacific Region. We value our relations with our Asian neighbour China and we will commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with China. In this context, I am looking forward to my State visit to China in May this year. We hope that the Middle East peace process would reach a satisfactory conclusion. Our relations with Israel will continue to grow. India values her close and friendly relations with the European Union, as well as with the countries of East Europe, with whom our ties of traditional friendship have seen a new dynamism in recent years. We will further strengthen our friendship with African, Latin American and Caribbean countries.

India looks forward to the consolidation of her time-tested, comprehensive relations with the Russian Federation into a strategic partnership. We await a visit to India by the President of the Russian Federation and the signing of the Declaration on Strategic Partnership between our two countries.

Relations with the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan and France have shown a gratifying consolidation in recent times. As a result of high-level decisions, we have launched a strategic dialogue with France that has produced encouraging results. The Indo-French Forum has also imparted a new dynamism to our engagement with France in the fields of culture, science and technology and business. I am looking forward to my State visit to France scheduled for April this year.

The Government has continued to engage the United States in a serious dialogue on security, non-proliferation and disarmament issues predicated on India maintaining a credible minimum nuclear deterrent. A significant outcome of this dialogue is the decision to set up a Joint Working Group to deal with cross-border terrorism, which is a menace to the whole world. We expect that President Clinton's visit to India next month will pave the way for a broad-based and multi-dimensional expansion of our bilateral relations.

India reaffirms her commitment to global nuclear disarmament in a time-bound manner on a comprehensive and non-discriminatory basis. While addressing multilateral disarmament initiatives and treaties, the Government will continue to abide by the imperative of preserving India's strategic autonomy.

The growing challenge posed by non-conventional threats, in particular by terrorism to global security, calls for urgent international co-operation and action so that these can be dealt with effectively. We call for the early adoption and implementation of a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism. India shall participate in any global effort to battle this crime against humanity.

Our vision of achieving a higher growth rate is not aimed at benefiting only the rich or the middle-class. On the contrary, the poor are at the centre of all our developmental efforts. We must recognize that we cannot improve the lot of the common man without achieving high rates of growth in the economy. Only an expanding economy can ensure growing employment and rising incomes for all. Unless India's GDP grows at a brisk rate of 7 to 8 per cent a year, there is no way we can banish poverty and underdevelopment. Higher growth alone will ensure that we can mobilize larger and larger resources for the social sector—for education, health, drinking water, sanitation and roads—particularly for those living in the villages and in urban slums. Towards this end, the Government stands committed to implement the social and economic agenda outlined in my last address to both Houses of Parliament.

Honourable Members, we begin the Budget session today, after transacting record legislative business in the last Winter Session of Parliament. Apart from financial business arising out of the General and Railway Budgets and the statutory requirement of replacing two Ordinances by Bills, we have a large agenda of legislative business relating to the all-round development of our economy and society. The Government is keen to complete this agenda in this very session.

I convey my best wishes to all of you.

Jai Hind.