

**SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE
AT THE BANQUET HOSTED IN THE HONOUR OF HE MR.
MAITHRIPALA SIRISENA, THE PRESIDENT OF THE DEMOCRATIC
SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF SRI LANKA**

RASHTRAPATI BHAVAN: FEBRUARY 16, 2015

Your Excellency President Maithripala Sirisena,

Mrs. Jayanthi Sirisena,

Hon'ble Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome His Excellency Mr. Maithripala Sirisena, President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, First Lady Mrs. Jayanthi Sirisena, and the distinguished members of his delegation on his first State Visit to India.

Allow me, Excellency, at the outset, to felicitate you on your electoral victory last month. It was an unequivocal expression from the Sri Lankan people for change, as well as a clarion call to pursue the path of harmony and genuine reconciliation. The reforms that your Government has initiated hold the promise of a better tomorrow for Sri Lanka and the region. As your immediate neighbour and the world's largest democracy, India takes pride in the strengthening of democracy in Sri Lanka, and stands ready to continue to extend all necessary support as Sri Lanka embarks upon a new chapter in its history.

Excellency, the emerald isle that you come from, has from its ancient name of *Serendipa* gifted to the English language the word 'Serendipity', a word which at once signifies a certain mystique as well as all that is pleasant. Sri Lanka occupies a special place in India's worldview. I would like to recall a couplet from the Tamil classic *Thirukkural* on friendship which roughly translated into English means 'True friendship is rare and hard to gain; once achieved, it protects against unpredictable woes'. The symbiotic relationship between India and Sri Lanka is not based merely on geography, which is compelling enough, but is also predicated on shared religions, cultural practices, family ties, linguistic commonalities, economic cooperation, political understanding, and much more.

In a testimony to this fraternal bond between our two countries, we jointly celebrated the 150th anniversary of Swami Vivekananda in 2013 and of Angarika Dharmapala in 2014. Not many would know that a Sri Lankan student of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, Ananda Samarakoon, composed the Sri Lankan national anthem, "Sri Lanka Mata".

In contemporary times, our relations have become multi-faceted, encompassing trade and investment, science, education, security and defence, and above all, people-to-people exchanges. As two cricket playing nations, we rejoice as much in the achievements of Sanath Jayasuriya and Muthiah Muralidharan as we do in our own players. In terms of foreign tourist footfalls in Sri Lanka, India ranks number one.

The first FTA that India signed with any country was with Sri Lanka. It is time to take our economic engagement to the next level. I am also happy that we are promoting cooperation in the knowledge sector. There has been a resurgence in the Indian economy over the last year, and Sri Lanka is well-placed to take full advantage of this. We should look at steps to enhance connectivity between our two nations.

India is privileged to be a partner in Sri Lanka's development efforts, focusing on capacity building, human resource development and infrastructure support. I am delighted that the flagship Indian Housing Project in Sri Lanka continues to make excellent progress. The recommencement of the iconic 'Yal Devi' train service, after three decades, between Jaffna and Colombo through the Indian-assisted Northern Railway Rehabilitation project is a matter of particular satisfaction. Sri Lankan investment in India has also seen some remarkable success stories in the garments sector.

Excellency, your electoral victory has opened new opportunities for further strengthening our bilateral relations. We must build on our deep and enduring links of history and culture, and work towards the shared prosperity of the people of our countries and the region. A vast vista of cooperation beckons us.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, may I request you to join me in raising a toast –

- to the good health of His Excellency, President Maithripala Sirisena;
- to the continued progress and prosperity of the Sri Lankan people; and
- to closer friendship and cooperation between India and the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka