

CONCLUDING REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE AT THE LUNCH HOSTED BY PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE AND THE PRESIDENT OF THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES OF THE BELGIUM PARLIAMENT

Brussels, Belgium: 03-10-2013

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, I would like to convey my sincere gratitude for the warm welcome and hospitality accorded to me and to my delegation. It is a singular honour and privilege to address this distinguished gathering in the Belgium Parliament. This Parliament, in more than 180 years of existence, has played a vital role in enriching the democratic fabric of Belgium.

India is no stranger to Belgium. Our relationship dates back to early eighteenth century when traders from Belgium, under the flag of the Ostend Company, established settlements in East and South India. It is said that Belgian chandeliers, mirrors and crystal ware can be found in places as diverse as palaces and ancient synagogues in India. For us in India, Belgian glass is synonymous with all that is perfect, beautiful and prestigious. The blood of our people is mixed with Belgian soil. During the First World War, more than one lakh thirty thousand Indian soldiers fought in the battlefields of Belgium and Northern France and more than eight thousand five hundred made the supreme sacrifice. Cemeteries in West Flanders pay tributes to these brave soldiers, many of whose names are carved in stone, at the imposing Menin Gate in Leper.

Today, India and Belgium are two vibrant democracies sharing common ideals and principles. Democracy, rule of law, freedom of speech, independent judiciary, free press and protection of human rights are fundamental values to which our two societies are wedded. In addition, India and Belgium are multi-cultural societies and our federal set-up provides for respect and promotion of rights

and freedom of various communities and regions. Our historical ties and our shared values provide us with a strong foundation for our relations.

I am happy that our countries have been expanding and deepening their partnership. Belgium is now India's second largest trading partner within the EU. In spite of the global crisis, our bilateral trade increased by more than forty per cent between 2007 - 2012. Our investment flows have also steadily increased in the last few years with Indian investment in Belgium exceeding Belgian investment in India. I hope that Belgian companies will actively consider taking advantage of our growing economy. I am glad to note that the Indian community in Belgium is contributing to the Belgian economy.

Belgium's strengths in the financial and service sector, creative industry, digital economy, and research and development are well developed and widely recognised. Culture and education are two natural areas where closer cooperation between us can benefit our peoples. I am happy to note that several Memoranda of Understanding have been signed between our academic institutions during this visit. I deeply appreciate the keen interest of the people of Belgium, and the support extended by the Government of Belgium, in organizing Indian cultural festivals in this beautiful country.

Tomorrow, I will be inaugurating Europalia-India festival along with His Majesty, the King of Belgium. This festival will showcase rich and diverse Indian culture in its multiple facets. I am confident that the cultural events will be appreciated by the people of Belgium.

India today is passing through an important phase in its history. The boundless energy and creativity of its youth has provided India with unprecedented opportunities. India is an ancient civilization but a young nation. Out of the 1.2 billion people in India, approximately 400 million people are between the ages one to fourteen. By 2030, we will have a dynamic work force of seven

hundred million with an average age of thirty five. This will constitute a substantial proportion of the world's work force. We look forward to leverage these opportunities through our friends, such as Belgium, for economic prosperity and progress of our people.

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

- To the health of His Majesty King Philippe and Her Majesty Queen Mathilde;
- To the health of His Excellencies Presidents of the Senate and the House of Representatives and honourable Parliamentarians;
- To the progress and prosperity of the friendly people of Belgium; and,
- To friendship and cooperation between India and Belgium.