

**FORMER PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB
MUKHERJEE DELIVERING INAUGURAL LECTURE
ON 'FURTHERING INDIA'S PROMISE' AT
SAMRUDDHA BHARAT FOUNDATION'S LECTURE
SERIES**

1. I am very happy to deliver the inaugural lecture for Samruddha Bharat Foundation's lecture series on Furthering India's Promise. The name of their lecture series - *Manthan*, is especially apt for any platform that strives to objectively reflect and critically work on driving a nation's social, economic and political trajectory.
2. Etymologically derived from the *Bhagvata* and *Vishnu Puranas*, *Manthan* describes the process of churning between good and evil, from which emerged 14 *Ratnas* and *Amrit* that benefited mankind. The idea of India also emerged from a similar *Manthan*. Stemming from an arduous process of civilisational interplay and co-

existence, accepting, accommodative, adaptive, adoptive and ever evolving, the Indian nationhood did not need an anti thesis to synthesize. Cultures and Civilizations never needed to establish itself. Our civilisational nationhood is not only tolerant, it respects differences, it does not only accept pluralism but encourages it, it does not only accept diversity but respects it.

3. I have quoted Rabindranath Tagore earlier and I quote again, ***“No one knows at whose beckoning call how many streams, of humanity came in indomitable waves from all over the world, over the millennia and mingled like rivers, into this vast ocean and created an individual soul that is called Bharat”***. These values have been a part of our collective consciousness for millennia. At this juncture, I cannot but remember Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru’s words from

the *Discovery of India* where he vividly described 'India'. He said and I quote, ***“India is a geographical and economic entity, a cultural unity amidst diversity, a bundle of contradictions held together by strong but invisible threads. Overwhelmed again and again, her spirit was never conquered and she remains unsubdued and unconquered. About her illusive quality of a legend of long ago some enchantment seems to have held her mind. She is a myth and an idea, a dream and a vision, and yet real and present and pervasive.”*** (Unquote)

4. Giving shape to that vision, and stemming from their experiences of the freedom struggle, our founders enshrined each of these principles in India's Constitution. Defining who we are, this visionary charter guaranteed that each one of us had equal opportunities to live with dignity and security, had equitable access to a better life, and is an equal partner in this nation's growth. It secured socio-economic equality for all, irrespective of their

religion, caste, gender and birth (as guaranteed by the *Right to Equality* and *Right against Exploitation*). It secured religious tolerance and secularism (as assured by the *Right to Freedom of Religion*). Safeguarding minority rights, our founders also secured *affirmative action* and the *cultural and educational rights* of minorities.

5. India's promise also pledges the right to form associations, freedom of expression of thought, abolition of untouchability, universal adult franchise, inclusive industrial development, and socialism. Most of all, our Constitution is a testament to the accommodation of our differences within the framework of an overarching idea of India.

6. This magna-carta of socio-economic transformation of the nation has been the foundation of India's rapid and inclusive growth in the last 70 years. Marking a radical departure from the "graded inequalities" of the past, our Constitution laid a framework for India to emerge as a beacon of hope and inspiration the world over. It is largely because of this vision that India was able to defy the pervasive skepticism about its survival.

7. Winston Churchill had infamously argued that ***“in handing over the government of India to these so-called political classes, we are handing over to men of straw, of who, in a few years, no trace will remain”***. Similarly, American scholar-journalist Selig S. Harrison had posited that ***“the odds are almost wholly against the survival of freedom and the issue is, in fact, whether any Indian state can survive at all”***. They and others had good reason to be skeptical. After a lifetime of colonial exploitation, India had been reduced to one of the poorest nations in the world. The average

standard of living in India had stagnated since about 1890, and nearly two in three Indians lived in poverty. Despite these formidable challenges, India made substantial strides forward and is today one of the world's foremost economies and largest democracy.

Unlike numerous other countries emerging from colonialism, the makers of modern India managed to maintain the unity of our nation and our democracy in spite of extraordinary challenges and tremendous diversity. This is an extraordinary feat.

8. India has grown in leaps and bounds in the last 70 years.

If India is to continue to rise to ever greater heights in the *next* 70 years, we must further the promise of the nation through creative policies and constructive politics. We need to continuously find ways to “build (onto) the noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell”. To do this, we need to critically review pressing structural problems facing India.

9. Firstly, we must recognize that the world is undergoing an epistemic shift. Environmental upheavals, pervasive inequities, mass migrations, and the unchecked flow of capital across borders (which has considerably weakened the nation-state's control over taxation and hence resources available for national development) has created large-scale inequities and loss of agency (both individual and that of the nation-state). Austria, Australia, Brazil, Italy, Spain, the United States of America, and numerous other countries have all been subject to similar pressures. The resultant frustrations at the State's inability to meet its welfare commitments are prompting a democratic upsurge that is impatient with the existing structures of power and state centre. This upsurge tends to restore the nation-state to its classical

Westphalian construct by identifying a common enemy. These pressures are not only causing, but also exacerbating societal tensions.

10. Secondly, this dangerous situation is leading to the collapse of the political centre, institutional atrophy, and centrifugal tendencies that threaten the sovereignty of the nation-state. Each one of the institutions that have led us to commanding heights are being challenged, and the pluralistic fabric of our nation is being strained. India is being tested against those very principles of differentiation and fundamentalism that Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, Babasaheb Ambedkar, Dr Rajendra Prasad, Maulana Azad, R. Amrit Kaur, Rammanohar Lohia and all our other founders so decidedly rejected at the birth of the nation.

11. To my mind, it is now troubling because this process is not only being seen as positively disruptive but even necessary by large sections of society. Faced by an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities, an increasingly number of our fellow Indians yearn for accelerated development that can secure “fullness of life” for all. They have started believing that it is their primordial identities that should be the basis for a claim on the State’s moral commitments. It is no coincidence that even though India has done well on economic growth indicators, we have fared poorly on the World Happiness Index. We rank 133 out of the 156 countries mapped in the World Happiness Report 2018. Consequently, diverse social groups, be they Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minorities, farmers, students, or other dominant castes, are increasingly relying on their own agency to claim their rights, sometimes violently. This is leading to a dramatic re-

conceptualisation of the relationship between the State and the Citizen.

12. To holistically address these interlinked socio-economic and political problems, we need to first engage in an honest dialogue to understand the complex problems that our polity and people face today. We must also free our public discourse from all forms of violence, physical as well as verbal. Finally, we need to work *together* to re-establish the foundations of an India that is responsive to the needs and aspirations of each of its citizens. Every citizen should feel that she or he has equitable access to the great vaults and opportunities of this great nation. As our founders once did, we need to zealously safeguard, and further the promise of India. Only then can we arrest the moral decline in our society and ensure that our core civilisational values remain vibrant.

13. In this context, I am extremely happy that Samruddha Bharat Foundation has taken the lead in spearheading a multi-volume set of publications that strive to meaningfully re-think current social, political and economic paradigms. I am given to understand that over 120 of India's foremost academics, activists and policymakers across party lines are writing essays proposing disruptive solutions to pressing structural problems. I hope these volumes, which aim to further the promise of India, will not only kickstart a dialogue on various sectoral issues, but will eventually be able to forge a national consensus. In short, I hope this *Manthan* produces the *Amrit* that India needs.

14. At the end, I wish to congratulate the trustees and advisors of Samruddha Bharat for their stellar work over the past year in influencing the polity, forging a coalition of peoples' movements (both in India and abroad), and shaping public discourse. This normative and ideological work is precisely what India needs today, and I wish them the very best of luck in their future endeavours. Once again, I thank you for inviting me to deliver the inaugural lecture.

Thank You

Jai Hind.

