

Remarks made by Hon. Dinesh Gunawardena, Minister of Foreign Relations in proposing a toast at the 71st Republic Day of India event on 26th January 2020

Your Excellency, Taranjit Singh Sandhu, High Commissioner of India to Sri Lanka
Honourable Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to represent His Excellency the President, the Government of Sri Lanka and its people on this auspicious occasion of the celebration of the Republic Day of India.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Sri Lanka and India enjoy longstanding relations spanning into millennia, closely interlinked by history, culture and religion. India is the closest neighbor of Sri Lanka and this close proximity between the two countries had contributed for exchange of civilizational heritage which had nourished each other's cultures and social values. Both countries are closely linked through the ancient philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism which remain a strong foundation in our conduct of governance.

Sri Lanka had always been accorded a special place in India's external relations. Beginning from the mythical legends, even as back as in the third century, during the Mauryan Empire, Emperor Asoka had taken personal interest to send his family as religious emissaries to Sri Lanka to share the Buddha's message of peace. Over time, the interaction between the two countries has manifested in shaping Sri Lanka's heritage and culture and contributed for the formation of our nation's identity.

In the post colonial period, our nations were shaped by great leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Shri Jawaharlal Nehru and cultural icons in the caliber of Rabindranath Tagore, who together brought an era of regaining the ancient values and wisdom in our region. Our two countries forged a stronger bilateral partnership as newly independent nations

of British rule with the establishment of formal diplomatic relations in 1948. Since then our relations grew further, in many folds, encompassing diverse areas bound by the principles of democracy and freedom.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are entering the second decade of the 21st Century with great aspiration at a time our relationship is redefined with renewed mutual respect and commitments for prosperity to our people. In November 2019, in the immediate aftermath of the Presidential Election in Sri Lanka, Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. Jaishankar visited to Sri Lanka, and he was the first foreign dignitary to pay a courtesy call the newly elected President.

In fact President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, after assuming the office, paid his first overseas visit to India and had very fruitful discussions with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other Indian leaders. I had the opportunity to pay my first official visit overseas to India as the Minister of Foreign Relations a couple of weeks ago, while Indian National Security adviser Ajit Doval visited Sri Lanka last week. The Hon. Prime Minister, Mahinda Rajapaksa is scheduled to undertake an official visit to India in the coming weeks. These high level bilateral exchanges mark the uniqueness and strength of our mutual affinity. We, as neighbors and nations, are poised to move our economies forward together in the coming decades in an era of Asian resurgence. We have an extensive work agenda before us to deliver fruition to achieve common prosperity.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Economies such as Sri Lanka could reap immense benefits from the economic successes of India which stands soaring as a global economic giant. India is expected to be the second largest global economy by 2050. We, in Sri Lanka, look forward to forge a robust partnership with India through manifold activities by improving air connectivity, defence cooperation, enhanced investments, people to people contacts and cultural exchanges.

In this context, we appreciate the Indian government's assistance for the development of the Palali Airport in the Northern Province as Sri Lanka's third international airport. Chennai-Jaffna flights have commenced after 40 years, and there are plans underway to extend the air services connecting the cities of Bangalore, Cochin, Mumbai and Hyderabad. Additionally Sri Lankan Airlines at present covers 14 Indian cities, facilitating people-to-people connectivity in a more tangible way. Sri Lanka received the largest number of tourists from India that amounted to 355,000 last year.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Both countries have close and strategic cooperation in the fields of defence, maritime security, as well as national security. The annual defence dialogues including Galle Dialogue, Sri Lanka -India Defence Dialogue and Trilateral Maritime Security Mechanisms have been beneficial for both countries to share their security concerns. We are also grateful to the Indian Government for sharing intelligence in addressing the rise of terrorism and extremism. Under the new Sri Lanka leadership, we remain hopeful in cooperating with India towards sustainable peace and security in the region through collaborations.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

India is Sri Lanka's biggest trading partner, 3rd largest export destination and the largest import sourcing destination. The total bilateral trade between India and Sri Lanka in 2018/19 was USD 6.2 billion with an increase of more than 18% compared to 2017/18.

India is also one of the major development partners in Sri Lanka. We appreciate the continued assistance that India offers in the form of loans, grants, credit lines and technical assistances that exceeded US \$ 2.5 Billion.

We are also appreciative of the Indian government assisted housing projects and as of today 47,000 houses have been completed out of 60,000 throughout the country. It is regarded as one of the largest projects undertaken by the Government of India abroad.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Last, but not least, let me extend my sincere appreciation to His Excellency Taranjit Singh Sandhu, for his yeoman service and commitment for the enhancement of bilateral ties between our two countries. On behalf of my government, and on my own behalf, I wish you every success, as you soon leave our shores to assume new responsibilities. Also, let me take this opportunity to thank the staff of the Indian High Commission in Sri Lanka for their continued support and cooperation.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Please join me on this joyous occasion to propose a toast:

To the good health and wellbeing of;

- His Excellency Shri Ramnath Govind, President of the Republic of India;
- His Excellency Shri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of the Republic of India;
- The People of the Republic of India,

And, to the enduring friendship between the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and the Republic of India.

Thank you.