

High Commissioner of India notes
“Confidence and Trust: Key to stronger friendship”

“What we can achieve together is constrained only by our collective imagination”

Q1. On the 72nd Anniversary of India’s Independence what message would you like to convey to the people of India and Sri Lanka?

On the occasion of the 72nd Anniversary of India’s Independence, I extend my warm greetings and good wishes to my fellow Indian citizens and to the friendly people and the Government of Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka.

In April-May this year, we completed the General Elections in India. Nearly 900 million eligible voters participated in what was described as the biggest festival of democracy in the world. The resounding victory of the incumbent government has led to stability, and is a reflection of the support for continuation of the Government’s policies of people-centric development.

The cornerstone of our government's foreign policy has been "SabkaSaath, Sabka Vikas aurSabkaVishwas (together with all, for the development all, and with the trust of all). This is not merely for India. It is our approach towards the whole world, and remains most significant in our neighbourhood.

Q2. How would you define the developments in India-Sri Lanka relationship in recent times?

Sri Lanka is our special neighbour. In recent times, the relationship has seen renewed warmth. There have been landmark moments in the last five years. There has been substantial strengthening of economic pillar of the relationship. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has visited Sri Lanka thrice

in the last four years. His visit in March 2015 was the first by an Indian PM in 28 years. His visit in May 2017 as Chief Guest for the Vesak Day celebrations is a milestone in our relations.

Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi was the first world leader, to visit Sri Lanka, which was a just few weeks after the Easter attacks. It was a solidarity visit to underline that India is with Sri Lanka in these difficult times. He made Sri Lanka part of his first overseas tour in his second tenure, once again reiterating the special nature of our ties. In the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks, we have offered all support to the Government of Sri Lanka, if they so require.

Whether it is flood, drought or fuel crisis, India has been the first to respond to Sri Lanka's requests. India is the largest source market for Sri Lankan tourism industry. Indian tourists come without preconditions and embrace Sri Lankan culture. More and more Indian couples are choosing Sri Lanka for their destination wedding. An increasing number of Sri Lankan students are opting for eminent institutions in India for higher studies. While Indian companies continue to make investments in Sri Lanka, Sri Lankan companies are achieving new successes in the Indian market as well. These are all symbols of the growing confidence and closeness in our relationship.

I want to underline two aspects which are crucial to any friendship or relationship, whether it is between individuals or countries: **confidence and trust**. You all know the story of the 1990 Suwaseriya Ambulance Service – which is a gift from India and is now available throughout Sri Lanka. Perceptions may not always be the reality. It is important to see things in the right perspective.

Q3. You mentioned 1990 Suwaseriya Ambulance Service, what are some of the other projects that India has done in Sri Lanka?

We have completed over 70 development partnership projects across all provinces in Sri Lanka. All of these are chosen and developed keeping

the priorities of people of Sri Lanka in mind. Indian Housing project is the largest of these grant projects. We have committed over 63,000 houses out of which 47,000 houses have already been constructed and handed over. This year the Indian Housing Project has expanded to Galle, Matara, Kegalle and Ratnapura districts. We are also setting up one model village in all districts of Sri Lanka. We feel happy that we are able to contribute to the lives of people living in villages.

Last year we built an auditorium for the students of Ruhuna University, the largest University auditorium in Sri Lanka. Soon we will be inaugurating a 5000 metric ton Temperature Controlled Cold Storage facility in Dambulla which will help farmers reduce crop losses. A national trilingual school for children in Polonnaruwa is also under construction.

We are currently executing 20 such projects from North to South and East to West.

Q4. You have mentioned about the opportunities arising out of India's growth, how can Sri Lanka benefit from it?

The scale and speed of economic transformation in India offers unprecedented opportunities. For Sri Lanka because of the geographical proximity and the close historical links, these opportunities are readily accessible.

We would encourage Sri Lankan companies to be part of the global and regional supply and value chains of Indian companies. Sri Lankan companies have created a name for themselves in producing niche products. I am happy that many Sri Lankan brands are getting popular in India. We have simplified our tax laws to create a unified market of 1.3 billion people. India is a huge market with a lot of diversity. Companies have to customize their products to suit these needs. This is a challenge as well as an opportunity. This understanding is the key to success in Indian market.

I would encourage Sri Lankan companies to be partners in India's growth story. We at the High Commission stand ready to assist the Sri Lankan companies in whatever manner we can.

Q5. Lastly, what are the areas where you feel the India-Sri Lanka relationship should focus on?

India and Sri Lanka are both ancient civilizations but also nations of young people. The aim for both of our countries should be to fulfill the developmental aspirations of the youth – to provide them with a prosperous, secure future. Towards this, our biggest investment has to be in our youth. We have to focus on education and skill development, and urge them to think out of the box, think big.

I feel there is much that Indian and Sri Lankan youth can learn from each other. We have recently successfully launched our second indigenously built Mission to moon- Chandrayaan 2. These are wonderful opportunities for us to share and to learn. We need to promote research collaborations in the field of S&T, Space.

We provide over 750 scholarships for Sri Lankan students to study in India and in Sri Lanka, and over 400 training slots under ITEC to the youth working in various fields. Entrance to prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology are now held in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan students can also apply for admission to medical colleges in India.

I believe we can do more, we need to start more institutional partnerships and interactions. Kelaniya University and Sri Ram College under Delhi University have entered into a partnership; Royal College Colombo and Lawrence School, Sanawar have also started an exchange program. These are a few examples but we can build on them.

There is also a lot we can share in the fields of agriculture, horticulture, dairy and animal husbandry etc. The list is endless. India-Sri Lanka relations are moulded, guided and strengthened by our collective

ambitions and aspirations. What we all can achieve together is constrained only by our collective imagination.

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