

**Speech by H.E. Venu Rajamony, Ambassador of India to the Kingdom of the Netherlands on the occasion of Reception hosted to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> Republic Day of India**

**Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam**

**[January 26, 2019]**

It is my privilege and honour to welcome you to this Diplomatic reception hosted on the occasion of India's 70<sup>th</sup> Republic Day.

2. I am grateful to all of you who have gathered here, especially our Guests of Honour - King's Commissioner, Ms. Jetta Klijnsma and Mayor Jan Van Zanen. Both are good friends of India. Ladies and gentlemen, please give them a warm welcome with a big round of applause.

3. The Embassy is grateful to the National Foundation de Nieuwe Kerk for having made available this special venue for holding our Republic Day reception for the second year in succession. This prestigious venue has witnessed the marriage of King Willem-Alexander and Queen Maxima in 2002 and as well as the inauguration of the King in 2013. Last year, we held our reception amidst an exhibition on Gandhi, King and Mandela. This year we are fortunate to be able to view an exhibition on the 'Life of Buddha'.

4. Siddhārtha Gautama or The Buddha, ladies and gentlemen, is amongst the greatest of India's children. Buddhism is believed to be the fourth largest religion in the world with a following of around 520 million. The religion took birth in India somewhere between the 6<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries before the Christian era and then rapidly spread to other parts of Asia. Many of you would be familiar with the rich art and culture associated with Buddhism which can be seen in India and many other countries. A sample awaits you as part of the exhibition. What is perhaps less known outside India is the major role and influence Gautama Buddha and his teachings had on the founding of our nation, our vision of the world and the Constitution whose adoption we celebrate today as Republic Day. Needless to say, the father of our nation, Mahatma Gandhi also drew direct inspiration from the teachings of the Buddha for his philosophy of non-violence.

5. Friends, Buddhism spurred in ancient India a major social revolution much like Reformation in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Buddha sought to reform existing religious practices, end rituals, diminish the power of the priesthood, stop animal sacrifices, reach out to the common man through their local languages and create a new social order based on equality. In an India ridden by conflict and social stratification, Buddhism brought the message of peace, non-violence and brotherhood.

6. The foremost champion of Buddhism in ancient India was our great emperor, Ashoka. Ashoka was a blood thirsty ruler who waged fierce war after war and conquered territory after territory. In 260 BC, he fought and won a bitter war in Kalinga in the east of India. Visiting the battlefield after the war, the Emperor saw the horrors he had wreaked. 100,000 had died and 150,000 had to be deported. The disastrous consequences of the war he had waged created an

internal transformation in him leading him to declare that henceforth he shall wage no more war. He will adopt the path of Buddhism and only pursue peace and non-violence.

7. Ladies and gentlemen, the national emblem of India today is the Lion Pillar taken from a stupa erected by this great Emperor Ashoka. It has four lions looking in four directions as well as a wheel with 24 spokes representing the Dharma chakra of Buddhism. The same Ashoka Chakra is also represented in the heart of our national flag which you see behind me. By adopting this Lion Pillar as national symbol and reflecting the wheel in the flag, the Republic of India recognizes its allegiance to the philosophies of Buddha, attests the positive change Emperor Ashoka brought to his rule and reaffirms its commitment towards upholding peace and tolerance.

8. Friends, interestingly, the Chairman of the Drafting Committee for the Indian Constitution, a great patriot and scholar Dr. B R Ambedkar was also a Buddhist by choice. He believed that the emergence of Buddhism in India was a development as significant in human history as the French Revolution. Dr. Ambedkar argued that democracy was not an invention of the modern West but a product of Indian history. The Buddhist sanghas or communities were among the earliest democratic institutions in the world. By adopting parliamentary democracy, India is returning to its Buddhist roots. He ensured that the Constitution fully reflects the ideals of Buddhism, in whose philosophy, liberty, fraternity and equality have a special place.

9. Upholding its Buddhist legacy, India is today the largest democracy in the world. In few months, India will hold its 17<sup>th</sup> General Elections. The electorate in the last elections of 2014 comprised of 834 million people with 533 million or 66.44 % casting their votes, all using electronic voting machines. At a time when political failures are evident in many parts of the world and there is talk about the need to breathe fresh life into Democracy as an institution, India stands ready to do so.

10. India today is also the fastest growing economy in the world. As the world economy slows. India is estimated to grow at around 7.3% this year and sustain this pace in the coming years. India crossed France last year to become the sixth largest economy in nominal GDP terms and has been for some time, the third largest economy in the world in purchasing power parity terms.

11. India is also a young nation with over half its population under 25. Our 1.3 billion people constitute the second largest single market in the world. Technology is rapidly transforming our nation. There is within our country a billion people with biometric IDs, mobile phones and bank accounts, eager to achieve financial inclusion and advance e commerce as well as e governance. The people of India are diverse, plural and multi-cultural, yet, fully united in our aspiration and determination to build a brighter future. Whatever be outcome of the upcoming elections, the one thing that is certain is that India's growth story will continue unabated.

12. Ladies and gentlemen, it is customary on occasions like this to review India – Netherlands relations. 2018 has been an action packed year. Since last January, Prime Minister Mark Rutte visited India accompanied by four senior Ministers, the Mayor of The Hague and the largest ever trade delegation comprising around 130 companies. Prime Minister Rutte's visit was quickly followed by a visit to India by Queen Máxima in her capacity as UN Secretary

General's Special Advocate for Inclusive Finance for Development. Two senior Ministers from India, the Minister for Food Processing and the Minister for Traditional Indian Medicine and Yoga visited the Netherlands. Mr. Menno Snel, State Secretary for Finance just returned to the Netherlands from a visit to India.

13. Major events organized by the Embassy over the last year included an International Ayurveda Congress on the theme of '*Hortus Malabaricus*', a 12 volume compendium of knowledge on medicinal plants of India prepared on the orders of the Dutch Governor in Kochi in the south of India and published in this great city of Amsterdam in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. We organized for the first time a special seminar on Science and Technology in the brain port of the Netherlands - Eindhoven. The two sides are now preparing for a Technology Summit later this year in Delhi.

14. Museumplein of Amsterdam witnessed the biggest ever celebrations of International Yoga Day and the International Day of Non-violence was celebrated in The Hague with a 'Gandhi March' and a programme to take teachings of Mahatma Gandhi to schools. I am grateful to my colleagues in the diplomatic community as well as other Dutch friends for their enthusiastic participation in these activities. This year marks the 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. A number of events are being planned to mark this occasion in which we hope all of you will join.

15. Friends, the only unfortunate incident which marred the otherwise happy Indo-Dutch ties was India being knocked out at the quarter final stage by the Netherlands in the World Cup Men's Hockey Tournament held in India after 8 years. Having lost, we rooted for the Dutch. But, sadly they lost to traditional rival and neighbour, Belgium in the finals in a penalty shoot out.

16. We now look forward to an equally busy year with many high level visits, business seminars and public events.

17. Permit me to conclude stating that in a troubled world beset with political and economic uncertainty, violence and terror; where differences between rich and poor continue to grow and climate change remains to be satisfactorily addressed, India is happy to have a friend and partner like the Netherlands with whom we share so much in common.

18. I conclude with a prayer for peace from one of our ancient scriptures:

*Om Shanti Antarik, Shanti Prithvi, Shanti Vanaspathaye*

*Om shanti shanti shanti*

*Let there be peace in the heavens and space,*

*Let there be peace on earth,*

*Let all the birds, animals and plants enjoy peace,*

*Peace, Peace, Peace.*

Jai Hind

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