

**SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI RAM NATH KOVIND
AT THE BANQUET HOSTED IN HONOUR OF THEIR MAJESTIES
THE KING AND THE QUEEN OF THE BELGIANS**

Rashtrapati Bhavan, November 7, 2017

It is an honour for me to welcome Your Majesties and the distinguished members of your delegation to India.

Your Majesties, although this is your first State Visit, you are cherished friends in our country.

As Crown Prince, you have visited India heading several fruitful trade Missions. You have, indeed, been a strong proponent of India-Belgium economic relations, much more than the shine of diamonds in our growing bilateral trade.

The people of India value and appreciate your personal contribution to the excellent relations between our two nations.

We are grateful to you for choosing India not just for work, but for your honeymoon and to intern as a student. We cherish the close connect the Belgian Royal family has with India.

Your Majesty,

We are celebrating 70 years of our diplomatic ties this year. Your State Visit, therefore, is very special. And for you to have begun it with a trip to the Taj should make it even more so.

I have no doubt that the agreements that have been signed today and the initiatives announced will mark the beginning of yet another chapter in our long-standing friendship.

India and Belgium are natural partners: we share a common commitment to democracy, human rights and pluralism with a desire to achieve a just and equitable world order.

Your Majesty,

We have interacted and engaged with each other much before we established formal ties. Indian soldiers fought and sacrificed in the Flanders Field to protect their Belgian brothers and sisters.

And in India, your people established schools and colleges. There were still others who dedicated their lives to promote our languages - Sanskrit and Hindi.

Building on these old ties, our relations today have grown deeper. Our people-to-people engagement has expanded.

Your delectable chocolates are being tempered with the aroma of our spices; our scientists are gazing the stars together and our hockey players competing with each other.

We have, indeed, entered into an exciting new world of mutual collaboration.

Your Majesties,

It is unique that the King in Belgium is addressed as the King of the Belgians, meaning the King represents its people. Belgium is special for many other reasons.

The world would not have been projected so accurately, if Gerardus Mercator did not invent the world-map projection.

Our children would have missed precious memories if Peyo did not design the comic franchise about little blue men called Smurfs, and Herge did not design the comic albums of 'Adventures of Tintin'. And this Bhavan would not have been as beautiful had it not been for the Belgium glasses and crystals.

Your Majesty,

The remarkable transformation of the Belgian economy following the World Wars made Belgium a key player in the intra-Europe trade and connectivity.

It has, ever since, remained at the vanguard of Europe's industrial progress.

At the present juncture, when India is engaging with the world to bring new energy to her development, we once again welcome Belgian investors to participate in our growth story.

Our government over the last three years has championed the cause of ease of doing business. The results are there for all to see. In the recent World Bank Ease of Doing Business rankings, we have jumped 30 places, and overall 42 places since 2014. We remain committed to further improving our standing.

Our efforts aimed at simplification of investment rules has seen FDI jump 150% to US Dollar 60 billion in 2016-17 compared to the US Dollar 24 billion received in 2013-14.

The implementation of our landmark reform – the Goods and Services Tax - has paved the way for a common national market, brought in greater transparency and compliance, and will make India a competitive place for manufacturing.

Your Majesty,

Belgium, situated at the very heart of Europe, has been instrumental in the process of uniting Europe into a successful single market. Your government has consistently remained committed to the European Project. India, too, sees the European Union as a factor of stability in a changing world and sincerely wishes its people every success.

I am confident that your State Visit will be a milestone in our efforts to enhance our cooperation and add new substance to our mutually beneficial partnership.

With these words, I once again welcome Your Majesties and wish you a very successful and personally enjoyable visit to India.

May I request you, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, to join me in raising toast :-

- to the health and well-being of Their Majesties the King and Queen of the Belgians;
- to the continued progress and prosperity of the people of Belgium and;
- to the enduring friendship between the peoples of India and Belgium.

Thank you.