

**ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA,
SHRI RAM NATH KOVIND
AT THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF SURINAME**

Suriname, June 20, 2018

1. I am honoured to be the first foreign Head of State to address the National Assembly of Suriname. In 1988, the then Vice-President of India, Dr Shankar Dayal Sharma, had addressed this august house. Coincidentally, four years later he was elected President and is one of my illustrious predecessors. I consider this invitation to be an honour for India, and a personal privilege for me. I thank all the Members of the National Assembly present here today, especially Madam Speaker Jennifer Simons for this invitation. And I cannot forget to mention the warm greetings I have received from President Bouterse and his government as well as the substantive talks and agreements of which we have just been a part.
2. This is my first visit to your spectacular country. The natural beauty, dense vegetation, striking variety of flora and fauna and clean tropical air are almost magical. Equally enchanting is the warmth as well as the diversity of the people of Suriname. I have been moved by the welcoming smiles, especially of little children who lined up as our motorcade drove past. There was such innocence and charm in their smiles. For me those children are the face of Suriname. And the many communities that live in harmony in Suriname are a model for the world. Coming from India, a country that is extremely diverse itself, we can perhaps appreciate your pluralism with greater feeling.
3. Shortly after landing yesterday, I paid tribute before a statue of Mahatma Gandhi, Father of our Nation and the great leader who led India in its successful struggle against imperial rule. This morning, I paid my respects at three iconic monuments of Suriname – the monuments of Baba and Mai of Mama Sranang and of Yaney Tetary. Immediately after this, I will be paying my regards at the Monument of Fallen Heroes. Each of these

monuments has an emotional significance for Suriname and for anti-colonial and nation building efforts across the developing world. These monuments speak for the blood, sweat and sacrifice with which the remarkable people of Suriname have wrested and preserved their independence and built a composite society marked by mutual sharing.

4. Nature has blessed your country with more than just beauty. It has given Suriname a strategic location that is truly enviable. Your presence at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, as a gateway to Latin America and to the Caribbean region, gives Suriname a solid business and developmental base. For India, you are an obvious partner as we seek to build on our already considerable trade, investment and cultural relations with Latin America and the Caribbean region.
5. The geographical distance between Suriname and India is vast. I understand that Paramaribo and New Delhi are almost 14,000 km apart. Yet, despite this transoceanic gap, our countries have much in common. Both Suriname and India are multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic democracies. Both Suriname and India have strived to build their economies and societies following a prolonged period of colonial rule. And both Suriname and India are dedicated to the welfare and uplift of our people. That is the true test and the most meaningful measure of our developmental efforts.
6. We live in a complex and sometimes contradictory world. The globalisation of the economy, the technology revolution, new mechanisms of communication and travel, and the explosion of the Internet have made our world smaller. There is enormous inter-mingling of people across countries and across continents. We sense that we are part of a global family. On the other hand, the hopes of our people are rooted in domestic and immediate needs. And it is for you as parliamentarians to meet and fulfil these. In that sense, the demands on Members of Parliament, and indeed on governments and others in public life, are both global and local.

7. Let us take the combating of climate change. This is an international concern, a foreign policy issue – and yet, for the people of Suriname it is a deeply-felt existential challenge. I must commend your country for its enlightened approach on climate change. You have shown a determination that even much larger and wealthier nations have shied away from.
8. Earlier this year, India hosted the founding conference of the International Solar Alliance in New Delhi. The ISA is an organisation headquartered in India and we are proud to have Suriname as a co-partner. A delegation led by Vice-President Ashwin Adhin participated in the conference and we are thankful to Suriname for ratifying its entry into the ISA. This will allow us to collaborate on solar energy projects that will be of benefit to your people and our planet.
9. It is not just in the field of renewable energy that India would want to partner Suriname. We are happy to share our developmental experiences with you, as per your needs, desires and priorities. Like in India, the young people of Suriname are the pride and potential of your country. It is critical to channel their energies and to build their capacities. This will allow them to create economic opportunities and contribute meaningfully to the economy and to society.
10. In this regard, India would be glad to share its know-how in skill development, digital development and incubating start-ups and an entrepreneurial culture – to the extent and in the manner that your people and your government feel it will benefit Suriname. I am glad to hear that young people in Suriname are making increasing use of facilities available under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation programme. We have also signed an agreement on the formal linkage of the Suriname Diplomatic Institute and the Foreign Service Institute of India. This will facilitate the training of Surinamese diplomats in Information and Communication Technology, in e-diplomacy and in diaspora diplomacy.

11. Fundamentally both Suriname and India are agricultural countries that are at once aiming to enhance farm productivity and incomes – as well as diversify our rural economies. In these endeavours, India, which is today the fastest growing major economy in the world, would be honoured to partner Suriname as you deem fit.
12. Indian agriculture has undergone a transformation in recent years. From a net food importing country, today India is a food surplus country and an exporter of food-grains and other agricultural products. This change has been brought about by the hard work of our farmers and by the deployment of agricultural technology. Our knowledge and expertise is available to Suriname as per its wishes.
13. Similarly, as you attempt to diversify your economy, India offers to be a viable and reliable source of technology, finance, logistics and capacity building. As Suriname develops options for its people, please feel free to tap into our technologies and institutional models. Suriname is endowed with minerals, forests, fresh water and vast stretches of arable land. There is no reason why it cannot become an economic powerhouse in the region.
14. Healthcare is another area where India would like to expand its development collaboration with Suriname. We believe that access to affordable and effective healthcare is a universal right. Towards this national endeavour our private sector companies have built considerable capacities to manufacture affordable generic drugs. Indian pharmaceutical products have travelled far and wide. They are of special relevance to developing societies in Africa, Asia and South America. We stand ready to cooperate with Suriname in the supply of high-quality but cost-effective pharmaceutical products. As Members of the National Assembly, you have an important role in facilitating legislation on the import of pharmaceutical drugs from India. Ultimately this will contribute to the wellbeing of the citizens of Suriname.

Ladies and Gentlemen

15. More than politics and commerce, more than diplomacy and business, Suriname and India are linked by shared values and a unique people-to-people connect. This House is the altar of democracy – of rule by the people. This is a principle that unites our countries. To add to that, a significant section of Suriname’s people have family roots in 19th century India. Of course they are proud and fully integrated citizens of your marvellous country, but the cultural bonds remain.
16. My visit coincides with the month-long celebrations of the 145th anniversary of the arrival of Indians in Suriname. A series of collaborative events has been planned. I thank the government of Suriname for its enthusiastic initiatives. The government of India has also provided support for artistes, academics and exhibitions. In 2023, when the 150th anniversary is observed, Suriname and India could perhaps join hands for an even bigger celebration.

Ladies and Gentlemen

17. My visit to Suriname ends on a special note. Tomorrow, June 21, is the International Day of Yoga. The practice of yoga began in India thousands of years ago but has been embraced and interpreted by millions across the world, including here in Suriname. It is not a coincidence that I will be here in Suriname on this day dedicated to promoting yoga and to promoting physical and mental wellness. One always likes to be among friends on special days. Tomorrow, along with President Bouterse and other dignitaries and friends in Suriname, I will be participating in the International Day of Yoga events that begin at 7.00 am. I invite you to join us and share the joy of yoga. Even more, I invite each of you to visit India at your convenience – and to share and deepen Suriname-India friendship.

Thank you. Danke veil