

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

July 29, 2019, Porto Novo

1. Today is a historic day in Benin-India relations. It is an honour for me to be paying the first-ever State Visit from India to your beautiful country. This has been made even more special by your gracious invitation for me to address your temple of democracy.

2. I bring with me the wishes of 1.3 billion Indians. I am overwhelmed by the warmth and affection with which I have been received. I will carry back these sentiments as a symbol of our enduring friendship. This is not a mere emotional assertion; but a thoughtful expression of a deeper connect that we share. History remains witness to the melancholic saga of our people leaving our shores, never to return - not of their free will but by the force of cruelty and greed. India was privileged to lead efforts that established a Permanent Memorial at the United Nations in New York to remember the victims of Slavery and Slave Trade. On our part, we thank Benin for its support towards global recognition of the Indenture labour heritage. I pay my deep respects to the monument at Ouidah and to all those who bore the brunt of inhumanity. Their sacrifice shall ever inspire us as we both march, hand in hand, to prosper as a democratic and free society.

3. Our ties are bound by a shared political trajectory. We both fought for freedom from the tentacles of colonialism and today are committed to deepen our democratic roots. This year we are celebrating the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of our Nation. As we remember him, we remain ever indebted to the African people for their contribution in shaping his political thought and action against injustice. He spent 21 years on this continent before he returned to India to win her freedom.

His teachings continue to resonate universally, in the same manner as the legacy of Cardinal Benardin Gantin, the proud son of Benin.

Ladies and gentlemen,

4. As fellow democracies, India and Benin have much to share. We deeply appreciate the strengthening of democratic roots in this country. The political journey you began in the 1990s has come a long way. Its uninterrupted consolidation over the last thirty years, in a complex and strife-torn region, is a shining example for many to follow. The importance of democracy for progress and prosperity cannot be overemphasized. Parliamentary traditions and procedures are integral to making our democracy deliver. I have been a parliamentarian myself and understand the faith and trust people repose in us. In this context, we appreciate the dedication and discipline your Parliament expects from you. I have been told that if members of this National Assembly miss more than one-third of the plenary sittings and Committee meetings they have to pay a hefty fine and also stand suspended from the Committee for a year! People's verdict, does call for selfless service and that is what you are delivering.

5. My travel to Benin is my first visit abroad after the successful conduct of our General elections. India's seven-phase, six-week long parliamentary elections, held in April-May this year, with an electorate of 900 million and over 67 percent voter turnout, has been the world's largest democratic exercise so far. Nearly half of the 543 Members of Parliament in the Lok Sabha, our Lower House, have been elected for the first time. More importantly, we saw 78 women Members of Parliament joining the Lower House, the highest ever in the history of our democracy. These are healthy trends for us. Beyond numbers, our Parliament vividly captures the diversity of India - from language, religion, ethnicity to culture – not just in its membership but in debates, discussion and lawmaking. This is an aspect where our two countries have a common story; we both have nurtured our plural culture. The vibrancy of the Indian community in Benin is testimony to your progressive thought and accommodation. They have lived side-

by-side their Beninese friends in harmony, sharing with each other their food and festivals.

Ladies and gentlemen,

6. My Government has adopted the vision of '*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwaas*', which means '*Collective Efforts, Inclusive Growth, With Everyone's Trust*'. On this basis, we are moving forward to build a strong, prosperous and inclusive India. This mantra is not just limited to our domestic agenda, but purposefully guides our external engagement as well. We remain committed to work with you to meet the aspirations of your people on this basis and in accordance with the principles of South-South Cooperation. We are honoured that we have been able to share our expertise and resources, in whatever manner possible, to support food, energy, water and health security in Benin. We hope to soon complete the upgradation of Water Supply Schemes in 103 villages in your country through a financing arrangement of US\$ 42 million. I am happy that Indian pharma Industry and hospitals are providing affordable healthcare solutions to people in Benin. Our partnership under the International Solar Alliance can help us light million homes in a sustainable manner and provide access to energy to people in the remotest corners. To further enhance our development cooperation, today I offered President Talon a concessional financial assistance of US\$ 100 million to help Benin meet its Sustainable Development Goals.

7. Our countries have a large youth population. If we can train them, skill them and gainfully employ them, we can reap huge demographic dividend. In India, we have started the Skill India Mission. Our target is to train 150 million youth over the next few years. We are privileged that we have extended our training programme to the youth in this country – to add value to cotton cultivation, to make agriculture sustainable, to incubate small businesses and to harness the power of the digital world. Technology has been at the centre of our development partnership with countries in Africa. Following the success of our Pan-African E-network initiative, we now look forward to the

implementation of the E-Vidya Bharati and E-Arogya Bharati initiative with Benin. Under it, we are offering free tele-education to 15,000 students and free tele-medicine courses to 1000 doctors and paramedics in various African countries. India is happy to share its digital revolution with Africa to enhance the well - being of its people and, in particular, empower its youth. Few days ago, we successfully launched our second Moon Mission – Chandrayan Two. The scientific gains from our Space programme have allowed us to strengthen communication, resource mapping and disaster management capacities in several African countries.

Ladies and gentlemen,

8. Our bilateral ties are enduring. Our global partnership makes it even more meaningful. We thank Benin for joining hands with us as stakeholders in the International Solar Alliance and strengthening the global fight against climate change. With equal determination, we must also continue to fight and defeat terrorism. The Gulf of Guinea has been a corridor of prosperity. Its safety and security are seminal for our continued growth and partnership. In this context, we both believe in freedom of navigation and abiding by international laws. We value Benin's anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Guinea and stand ready to enhance our defence and security partnership with you. We must also work together to make global governance more equitable, and for this stronger multilateralism needs to be guaranteed. In our quest for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council, we also fully support due African representation in an expanded UN Security Council.
9. From global governance to global growth, India is emerging as a key driver. Our GDP of US\$ 2.6 trillion is set to double in 7 years. As India's economy grows, so will our external engagement. In this matrix, countries in Africa will continue to play a prominent role, as our trusted partners and as stakeholders in our prosperity. Benin is the 8th African country that I have visited since taking over as President of India two years ago. On this tour, I will also be visiting The Gambia and the Republic of

Guinea. My travels reflect the priority we attach to Africa, and to the dynamic sub-region of West Africa.

10. We view the Republic of Benin as a fast growing economy, a friendly partner and an important gateway to West Africa. India is today a leading trading partner of Benin. Our two-way trade touched a record US\$ 803 million in 2018-19. We are pleased that Benin has benefitted from India's Duty-Free Tariff Preference scheme leading to an increase in Benin's exports. Today, we have announced extending our e-visa facility to Benin. This would give a major boost to our people-to-people relations and business ties. I would like to thank President Talon for his leadership, personal attention and support to our bilateral cooperation, as also to the nearly 100 Indian or Indian-owned companies in Benin, who have contributed a lot to our trade and investment ties.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

11. The India-Benin story is one of deep rooted friendship and optimism. Our democracies have brought us together in an embrace that many wish to emulate. Together, we have weaved a vibrant present and remain committed to a brighter future. I once again compliment you on emerging as a shining example of a tolerant and progressive, multiethnic and multi-religious society with a stable, multi-party democracy in West Africa. India as the world's largest democracy with pluralism at its heart wishes for even greater success for you and your people.

Merci Beaucoup! Thank you.