

**ADDRESS BY THE SPRESIDENT OF INDIA,
SHRI RAM NATH KOVIND
AT THE INDIAN COMMUNITY RECEPTION IN BENIN**

July 30, 2019, Cotonou

1. Let me begin by congratulating Ms Zeynab Abib for an excellent rendition of Mahatma Gandhi's favourite bhajan – Vaishnav Jan to Tene Kahiye. She has most gracefully combined African sensibility to Indian spirituality. That this bhajan was sung in this venue – Madiba Hall – and that too in a year when we are celebrating the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, makes it even more special. Rarely do we get a chance to remember our iconic leaders - Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela - in a manner that we have done today. Thank you very much for this special welcome.
2. भारत से बेनिन की पहली राजकीय यात्रा पर आकर मुझे बहुत प्रसन्नता हुई है। पश्चिम अफ्रीका की यात्रा का यह मेरा पहला अवसर है। मुझे गाम्बिया और गिनी गणराज्य भी जाना है। भारत की ओर से इन देशों में भी ,राष्ट्राध्यक्ष स्तर की यह पहली यात्रा होगी। मेरी यात्राएं ,अफ्रीका महाद्वीप के सभी देशों के साथ अपने सम्बन्धों को मजबूत बनाने की हमारी सरकार की प्रतिबद्धता का प्रतीक हैं।
3. आज सुबह आप सभी के बीच आकर मैं बहुत प्रसन्न हूं। मुझे बताया गया है कि बेनिन के अलावा नाइजीरिया से भी भारतीय समुदाय के लोग यहां आए हैं। मैं आप सभी का अभिनंदन करता हूं। अभी तक मैंने जिस भी देश की यात्रा की है , उस देश में रह रहे भारतीय समुदाय से मिलने को मैंने हमेशा प्राथमिकता दी है ताकि उन्हें भारत की विकास-गाथा के बारे में बता सकूं और उनके परिवार तथा मित्रों की शुभकामनाएं उन तक पहुंचा सकूं। दूर देश में रह रहे अपने भाइयों-बहनों से मिलना ,मेरे लिए एक विशिष्ट अनुभव होता है और इसे मैं अपने हृदय में संजोकर रखता हूं।

4. Yesterday, I held wide ranging discussions with the President of Benin. I was also given the special honour to address the National Assembly. In my interactions, I was assured the fullest support to further strengthen India-Benin ties. The Benin leaders were effusive in their praise for you, for your hard work and the value that you bring to the local economy and to the local community. To take our partnership forward, we signed several agreements with Benin. We have offered a concessional loan of US\$ 100 million to finance development projects in the country and have agreed to help Benin set up its Export Credit Agency. We have also offered our tele-education programme, E-Vidya-bharati, and tele-medicine project, E-Aarogya-bharati, to skill and train the youth in Benin. In addition, a Cultural Exchange programme has also been signed. We seek your valuable support in making these initiatives a success.

Ladies and gentlemen,

5. Our relations with the African continent are deep and varied. Many of you present here have lived in Benin, Nigeria and in other African countries for generations. Today, in every African country, we have a thriving Indian community. But I am most impressed by the achievements of our brothers and sisters in Benin. You have earned a name for yourself and in the process created immense goodwill for your country. You have, indeed, been true cultural ambassadors of India.

6. As you are aware, we recently held our general elections in India. It was the largest democratic exercise on this planet. Our new Government has received a strong and decisive mandate. Its commitment to bring about transformative changes in the country - from building next generation infrastructure to harnessing next-generation technology, from empowering women and youth to doubling the income of farmers - remains absolute. In accordance with its mandate, the 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. We want to walk and run this journey not alone, but with friends, families and partners. We count on our Diaspora, as entrepreneurs, as professionals, as change-makers or simply as ambassadors of Indian values and culture to support our growth.

7. Today, India has emerged as a key driver of global growth. In the next seven years, our target is to become a 5 trillion dollar economy. Our engagement with the world, therefore, is set to increase manifold. Our partnership with Africa will occupy a central place in this matrix. We have decided to open 18 new Embassies in Africa, 7 of them in West Africa. In this context, consolidation of our ties with countries like Benin is very important. India is Benin's largest trading partner. Nearly 100 Indian or Indian-owned companies are operating here. You can help us create new business and investment

collaborations between Benin and India and support our growth and development.

8. Much of what our two countries have achieved today, would not have been possible without the contribution of the vibrant Indian community in Benin. You have travelled far and wide and worked and excelled in difficult circumstances. In Africa in general, and in West Africa in particular, you have gone even further and become an engine of economic growth. And not just that, you have also shared the benefits of your prosperity with the local people.

9. I am most impressed to learn of the work being done by the Indian Association in Cotonou. In the absence of an Indian Embassy in Benin, the Association has become an important bridge between our community members and the Indian Mission in Abuja, Nigeria. Be it extending help to any distressed Indian, or facilitating consular services, the Indian Association has always been at the forefront. The Indian government appreciates this work even more, for we have mandated our Embassies abroad to take prompt and effective action whenever our people need help. We have effectively used social media tools to reach out to people in distress. And not just for consular and passport services. In the last 5 years, we have rescued over 90,000 Indians, as well as nationals from 50 other countries, caught in humanitarian crises and similar situations abroad. As a result of our efforts, our people overseas are assured of their safety and welfare. Our people-

centric approach has indeed instilled a new confidence in them towards their government.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

10. Benin, your adopted home, has made major progress as a democracy. This has allowed you to prosper and grow, to maintain your culture and traditions, and to celebrate your fairs and festivals. And while you have done so, you have always given a helping hand to your Beninese friends, be it facilitating their visits to India for medical treatment and education or helping them in need. That is why there is so much goodwill in Benin for India. I am happy to learn that our community has even joined hands to run a CBSE-pattern Indian International School in Cotonou. It speaks well of you that the school is popular not just among Indians but with Beninese and foreign students as well.

Ladies and gentlemen,

11. Your approach to life and accomplishments make us truly proud. I do hope that you will continue with your good work in the service of India and for the betterment of India-Benin relations. I wish you success and prosperity in the years ahead. And as I do so, I invite you to visit Rashtrapati Bhavan, when you happen to be in Delhi next. It may be my office-cum-residence but first and foremost it is a national monument that belongs to all Indians. And you must come by to soak its heritage and pride.

Thank you!