

# An Agenda for India

The Speech We Deserved to Hear on August 15

Madhu Kishwar

**T**HIS is the 50th year of India's Independence. The occasion has been celebrated through a host of Sarkari functions presided over by netas who harangued us with pious platitudes about our supposed great achievements and the tasks before the nation. However, there has been very little sign of celebration and rejoicing among the people - rich or poor, urban or rural, young or old, male or female. There is a general consensus that we are in deep mess primarily due to the doings and misdoings of our political leaders, policy makers and bureaucrats. The continuing widespread poverty in India, the increasing criminalisation of our economy and polity has demoralized the Indian people. We all feel let down beyond words.

Yet, even the honest and sincere among our political leaders don't offer us anything more than knee jerk reactions. The historic speech delivered on the 50th anniversary of our Independence by prime minister I.K. Gujral is a noteworthy example. He made a mockery of his resolve to fight the all pervasive corruption in public life by announcing the setting up of a special anti corruption cell in the Prime Minister's Office in typical imperial style as though something that has gotten into the very fabric of governmental functioning can be dealt with by one special cell. For all his sincerity Gujral's Independence Day speech did not evoke much enthusiasm or hope. It was filled with the usual platitudes and naive policy announcements like banning the already banned sex determination tests, launching ambitious sounding but unimplementable schemes for the "welfare of the girl child" and so on as proof of his commitment to improving the life of ordinary citizens.

Like most people I too felt disappointed and asked myself: What kind of speech would I have liked to hear on that historic day? What kind of an agenda of reform would make sense in today's context? Though, no prime minister is ever likely to ask me to be his ghost speech writer, I did the exercise anyway to delineate and clarify for myself some of the most urgent tasks our political leadership would have to undertake and commitments they would have to make in order to bring about responsible governance and help restore the health of our society.

"My fellow countrymen and women. This is the 50th anniversary of India's Independence and yet we have very little to celebrate and a lot to feel ashamed about. I would be failing in my task if I gave you a pious hypocritical speech about our supposed great achievements in these five decades of Independence. Anyone who holds an important public office has no right to lie to the people, to deliberately misinform them about the state of affairs.

No amount of sophistry, ideological rhetoric or jingoism can help us hide the fact that we have made this country a living hell on earth for the vast majority of our people.

Millions of children continue to die every year of malnutrition and easily preventable diseases. Our track record in the health sector is abysmal. We have not been able to provide functioning primary health centres in



our villages. The few hospitals that exist in urban areas may be spreading more disease than helping to cure people. We have one of the highest female mortality rates in the world, pointing to the abysmally low status of women. We have destroyed people's ability to fend for themselves and made the procurement of even basic survival needs-water and fuel-a grim struggle.

Majority of our people are still illiterate. Barring a tiny elite which receives expensive education in exclusive schools, the quality of education *sarkari* schools provide is so poor as to render the whole exercise a tragic waste. Millions of children

never reach a school and, of those who do, a large percentage have the good sense to reject the farce that goes by the name of *sarkari* education.

The income gap between rural and urban areas has widened rapidly after Independence pointing to neglect and stepmotherly treatment of the farm sector. The continuing stranglehold of the licence-permit raj despite the rhetoric of liberalisation has crippled our economy and made our industrial class inefficient and corrupt.

I say all this not with a view to demoralise us all further but to tell you that we cannot afford to let things continue like this. We, the political leaders, have created a gigantic mess and failed the people of India by following suicidal policies.

The rot starts from the top and, therefore, has to be stemmed from the very top. It is with this realisation that I would like to make some solemn commitments to you on this day and plead for your cooperation in helping me honour these promises.

As a person holding the highest office in the land, I promise you that I will never wilfully lie to you. I will try my best to ensure that telling the truth becomes the rule in this government. You help your leaders become corrupt by putting very low demands on them — you have come to expect them to lie and cheat routinely. You get upset only when their falsehoods get totally out of control. You have to stop being so generous and must stop making such allowances for those in positions of power and influence. If a person occupying a public office knowingly misinforms and misleads the people, such a person should be considered unfit for that position.

Let us not think that truth telling ought to be reserved for Mahatmas. It ought to be the first qualification for a person holding public office. As an ordinary citizen, I can be forgiven such failings, but not so when I am

### *We Should be Ashamed that:*

- Between 1988 and 1992 India was ranked first in arms imports but 147th in per capita income.
- 44% of India's total population lives in absolute poverty today.
- 53% of children (60 million) under age four are underweight and under nourished
- Nearly one-third of the world's poor live in India.
- In mega cities 57% of the population lives in slums.
- Nearly one-third of India's children under 16 are forced into child labour.
- 88% of all pregnant women between ages 15-49 suffer from anaemia and are malnourished
- 88% of all pregnant women between ages 15-49 are anaemic and malnourished.
- 291 million adults are still illiterate.
- Every year there are 2.2 million infant deaths in India.
- 291 million adults are still illiterate.
- 640 million people have to do without basic sanitation.

Sources : *Human Development in South Asia, 1997*  
*Human Development Report UNDP, 1997*



***The Official Secrets Act will be replaced with a Duty to Provide Accurate Information Act... Truth telling ought to be the first qualification for a person holding public office.***

given an office of trust on behalf of millions of people.

As you know, while taking office, I refused to take the oath routinely given to ministers whereby they swear not to disclose official information. That, in my view, reflects mistrust of the people and a typically colonial mentality. A democracy cannot

function effectively without citizens having the right to honest and accurate information. My first task as prime minister will be to introduce a law to replace the pernicious Official Secrets Act with a Duty to Provide Accurate Information Act which will lay down detailed guidelines regarding how information at the disposal of official agencies has to be routinely shared with citizens.

I cannot imagine any department of the government which benefits either itself or the interests of the nation by keeping any secrets. That includes the holiest of the holy cows — the Defence Ministry. Defence preparedness needs to be a secret affair only for those countries which have designs on others. But India, committed as it is to a policy of peaceful co-existence with our neighbours, need not hide from them the level of preparedness we are maintaining purely for self defence. Excessive secrecy in our defence affairs has allowed for widespread corruption, inefficiency and incompetence even in our armed forces, with kickbacks and commissions becoming the determining factor for all defence

purchases and deals. These arrangements should be as open and transparent as the affairs of the local corporation ought to be—but are not.

The new law will provide that any official found to be providing wrong information to the public would automatically be suspended from his job and face an enquiry. The burden of proof will lie with the official and, if found guilty, he/she will be disqualified from further government service.

I am convinced that once the veil of secrecy is lifted, much of the corruption and incompetence that has come to be the hallmark of government functioning will start to disappear.

The root cause of our problem is that the system of governance we are saddled with was devised by our erstwhile colonial rulers for running an exploitative, tyrannical empire. It is totally unsuited for running a democracy. But we have so far lacked the courage to change the rules and rationale of governance through radical institutional reform. We are still governed by antiquated laws the British left behind giving vast arbitrary powers to those who hold government office.

The people of this country have continued to be treated like colonial subjects even after we got political independence. Those in power, those manning the government machinery—from the minister to his *chaprasi*—continue to trample upon people's self respect, make them grovel as though before a feudal lord. This has destroyed the collective self-confidence of Indians as a people. This relationship has to change if India is to make progress.

The nuisance value of the government has to be reduced by



effective controls exercised by the people over government functionaries. I mean it not just as an empty slogan—the likes of which we have heard enough—but as the guiding philosophy of a well worked out programme for institutional reform.

Much of the mess in this country is due to overcentralisation of power. The Prime Minister's Office and various ministries ought not to be allowed to function like imperial *darbars*. I vow to systematically dismantle the many vicious controls that the central government exercises as well as those that in turn allow the state governments to function in the same imperial tradition. For that purpose, my party and government stand committed to abolishing some of the imperial, all-powerful elitist services like the IAS whose bureaucratic stranglehold is responsible for most of the mess in this country. As the key instruments of centralised power and decision

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making, they have imposed disastrous policies on the nation. They have too much power, but very poor skills and expertise to handle the enormous power they wield and almost no accountability. Consequently, too many of them have converted their offices into extortion centres. Without their cooperation even ministers or MPs cannot get away with corruption and shady deals. The thievery and mismanagement at the top

makes it impossible to impose any discipline and accountability at lower levels. Therefore, we will begin by getting rid of all those services which have become a dead weight for the entire society.

Apart from altogether abolishing certain services, we commit ourselves to cutting down the size of the bureaucracy to one tenth the present level within our first year in office. Government jobs and promotions will be performance related—not allowed to be treated as a lifelong licence to loot the public.

I also reaffirm our commitment to abolishing the four tier services at all levels of our government which are more vicious than the much reviled *chaturvarna* system. There will only be one entry point for all the services—only one class of government employees. The army of peons, clerks and section heads provided to every official will be abolished through new legislation ready to be introduced before the parliament in this session. It is time our officers learn to carry their own files, type their own letters, answer their own phone calls, drive their own cars. That would be the first lesson in teaching them to work efficiently. The police reform will follow a similar pattern. There will be only one entry point into the service and every officer

shall be expected to do field duty. We will aim to re-cruit the most talented and well educated young people into the police force who will be trained in the most sophisticated methods of crime control so that they don't resort to torture and other crude methods to enforce law and order. The police force will be reorganised so that the power, to hire and fire officers shall rest with the elected representatives of each community or neighbourhood that the *thana* is supposed to serve. This will



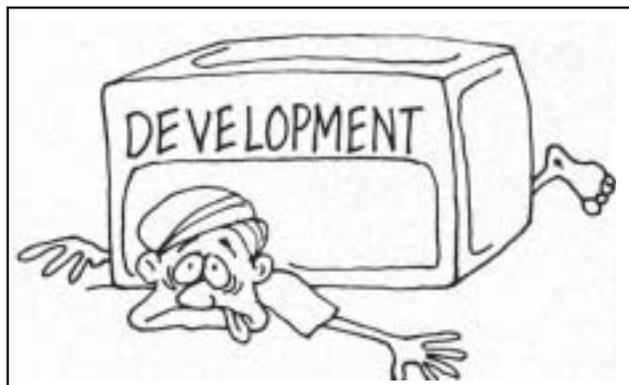
help curb the vast arbitrary powers that the police have accumulated. The same principle will be applied to all government departments which are meant to provide public services.

Disciplining government employees and making them behave lawfully is a vital priority task before the administration. Today the proportion of crooks in our society is highest in and around government offices. The government has become the prime instrument for spreading crime in our society. This has to change if we want to move out of the political and economic mess we find our country in.

It is a sign of a corrupt polity and a stagnant economy that competition over seemingly low paying government jobs has become a do or die matter for so many of our poorly trained young men. Today, government jobs provide the safest avenue for getting rich without doing any work or possessing any worthwhile skills. That has to change. In order to encourage people's economic initiative, we will work hard to systematically remove all the needless statist controls that have made it impossible for

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citizens to earn an honest living without grovelling and obtaining the permission of the *sarkar* through bribes. This culture has wrecked our economy. A thorough dismantling of needless controls will encourage entrepreneurial skills and open up many new avenues of employment. It is time we ended farces such as the Jawahar Rozgar Yojna, which pretend to throw a few crumbs to insignificantly small number of people while actually providing opportunities to our *netas* and *babus* to siphon off vast amounts of our scarce public funds.



Even the agenda of economic reforms has been reduced to a joke by limiting public discussion of economic reforms primarily to issues such as the entry of foreign capital and MNCs, and to dismantling some controls that impinge on the topmost economic players in our country. It is important to remember that no more than 4-5 percent of the people earn their living from the organised sector of the economy. The rest are dependent on agriculture, or are self employed in a range of

occupations or work in the unorganised sector of our economy. It is time we asked what the economic reforms have to offer the ordinary citizens of the country apart from viewing them as hungry consumers of new brand products.

My government's agenda for economic reforms will focus on the hitherto neglected farm sector, for agriculture provides a livelihood to about 70 percent of our population. We have squeezed our farmers through vicious interventionism designed to keep the prices of farm products far lower than the products of urban industrial goods. In the last few decades we have allowed the gap between rural and urban incomes to widen manifold which has encouraged the flight of capital and skills from rural areas. In addition, we have followed policies that prevented the emergence of agro-based rural industries.

These, in my view, are the prime causes for India's grinding poverty. Our farmers and others dependent on the agricultural economy need no subsidies, no "development programmes", no *rozgar yojnas*. All they need is that this corrupt, bloated

and obstructionist government machinery get off their backs! The government will no longer compel the farmers to sell their produce at arbitrarily fixed *sarkari* prices. We will remove all zonal restrictions on trade of farm produce, encourage agricultural exports and undertake massive investments in providing infrastructure in rural areas — electricity, water, irrigation, good roads and telecom linkages for every village. We will do this work literally on a war footing and employ India's large standing army for this purpose so that this task can be achieved within the next five years.

I am confident that freeing the farm sector from the *sarkari* clutches will unleash unprecedented economic initiative in our own villages and we will need no foreign aid or food imports to bring down prices. In fact, our farmers have demonstrated their ability to compete successfully in the international market despite government's obstructionist policies. By encouraging the farmers to enhance their incomes through exports, we will also be giving a major boost to production. In addition, the government will remove all the restrictions on agro based industries so that new avenues of employment are created in rural areas by people's own investment and initiative. India can move out of the poverty trap only when its villages become prosperous.

We boast that we are a nuclear power and have all kinds of deadly missiles for national defence. At the same time we have to admit that we have failed to defend our people against ill health and the deadly curse of illiteracy in today's world. A country is primarily its people. If millions of Indians are illiterate, malnourished, sick and dying of easily preventable diseases, of what use are big armies and weaponry standing at the border?

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To honour my government's commitment to making basic public health and primary education the highest priorities for our country, we commit to spending on these two areas double the amount we presently spend on our armed forces.



We will aim for high quality schools with enthusiastic, well paid, conscientious teachers, and the best possible primary health centres for every single village in the country. However, these institutions will no longer be controlled by distant bureaucrats sitting in Delhi and the state capitals but by local *panchayats* who will evaluate how

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well the schools and health care centres function in achieving basic education and good public health; these *panchayats* will have the power to hire and fire those who do not perform well.

Decent health care is impossible if people don't have clean and adequate water for drinking and other basic needs. This has to become available in every home within the next few years, or else the government has no right to exist.

I am convinced that we cannot improve the quality of our education without doing away with the use of English for elite education and the use of regional languages for the rest. This has created a vast unbridgeable communication gap between the English educated and the rest of society. The former can talk to and understand people in New York far better than they understand their own non-English speaking grandmothers. The educated elites in a functioning society are supposed to provide intellectual leadership to their people. In our case, the colonial intelligentsia we are producing through English education is incapable of identifying with the aspirations of their own people. Instead, it aspires to simply mimic the lifestyles and value system of the western elites, fantasising it can transform New Delhi into a New York for the powerful few. This dependence on the English language has crippled us intellectually and enslaved us emotionally and mentally.

We will continue to study and use the English language for communicating with foreigners, but it ought not to be the language of administration and business within the country; it ought not to invade our private lives or become the language of nursery rhymes and even get used for communicating with our pets!

People alienated from their mother tongue, their own language, cannot escape being culturally and emotionally uprooted. Through the dominance of English the collective wisdom of centuries is being lost to us and has become an important reason for our lack of self-confidence and self respect as a people. It has taught us to view ourselves, our failings and strengths through the eyes of others who make us feel inferior, and give us a sense of inadequacy. A people lacking in self respect not only turn to self-hatred but also become self-destructive. That has been the all pervasive mood for too long. I feel sad to see us grumble, to criticise, to complain endlessly — but without showing any initiative for collective determined action.

We can develop the confidence that we can solve these problems, no matter how overwhelming they appear today, only if we learn to act purposefully, devise institutions that function, promote team work, follow sensible, well established norms and learn to evaluate government performance not by its pompous claims and populist slogans but by actual results. We have wasted too much time already. We can't afford to waste a minute more.

There is so much that needs doing in this country to make it a place where people can live peacefully in dignity and without being haunted by hunger and ill health. However, at the same time, a sensible government ought to know the limits of its power and responsibilities. It has no business to be running hotels, airlines, steel factories or even telecom services. Useless government and public sector undertakings have become parasites sucking out the vitality of the rest of the economy. Our government will no longer allow basic



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industries and essential services to be kept in the government clutches and rationed out just to provide patronage for our *netas* and *naukris* for a few lakh employees. The affected working people will be provided adequate compensation so that they can employ themselves productively.

***An honest, non-partisan and effective legal and judicial machinery is the most basic requirement of a well-functioning democracy.***



Government's primary job ought to be to ensure law and order, give people a sense of security that their human rights and citizenship cannot be trampled upon with impunity, and provide an honest, non-partisan and effective legal and judicial machinery. This is the most basic requirement of a well-functioning democracy.

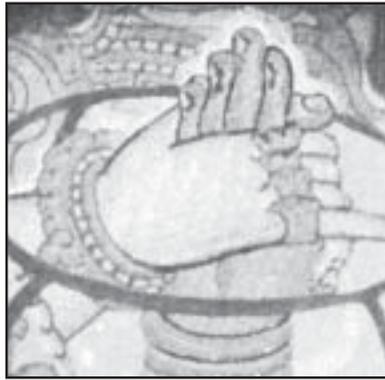
We need to get rid of the vast plethora of cumbersome and useless legislations and establish very few meaningful and effective laws which allow people to live in security and carry on economic and social activities without fear. The law courts will be rehailed thoroughly. They will not function in a language foreign to most people and laws will be written in simple language. Cases will have to be argued in the language understood by the litigant. The use of English will be replaced by regional languages so that hiring trained lawyers is not a necessity for fighting one's own case. We are legislating a fixed time frame for disposal of cases. Judges will be called to account if they fail to deliver judgements within a maximum of 18 months of a case being admitted to court. In addition, the new law provides for heavy fines to be imposed on whichever of the litigants causes needless delays by seeking frivolous adjournments. Lying on oath will be treated as a serious offence in order to curb the practice of

pressing false claims and trumped up charges. The present overload on the courts will be lightened by creating *nyaya panchayats* with juridical powers in every village. The next layer of courts will be provided at the block level so as to make the judicial system more accessible, efficient and inexpensive.

One of our greatest strengths as a society is its great diversity. Our people had over the centuries evolved very humane and sophisticated norms for living together peacefully. Pre-British India had no history of communal riots and killings. Where else in the world do you see religious shrines where people of different faiths, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, join together at numerous places for common worship and even celebrate each other's religious festivals?

However, the colonial legacy of divide and rule which led to the disastrous Partition of 1947 was further perfected in post Independence India by unscrupulous politicians who made instigation of ethnic conflict into a lucrative electoral business. The legacy of the Partition in which millions were massacred and many more millions uprooted from their homes and made refugees in their own land still haunts us because we failed to learn the right lessons from that holocaust.

The periodic eruptions of inter-community riots and massacres in post Independence India are a matter of great shame for us as a society. Today on this 50th anniversary of that suicidal Partition, we must resolve never to let such divisive politics succeed in this country again. I give you my sincere promise that our government will do its best to ensure that the law and order machinery functions in a non-




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partisan way, that the police don't join in carrying out massacres and loot, that those who commit such crimes against society are speedily brought to trial and punished. I am convinced that if the state machinery refuses to provide support and protection to such murderers, our politicians will not dare to instigate people into organising riots and pogroms.

However, the real test of our democracy is to work out decent, workable norms for majority-minority relations and give the minorities a sense of security and a real stake in the system. This is an easy task because it will invariably benefit every community equally. Given India's heterogeneity, every community is a minority in some place or situation and a majority elsewhere. For

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example, the Hindus are a minority in Kashmir, Ladakh, Punjab and Nagaland. The Muslims are a minority in every other state but not in Kashmir. The Sikhs are a majority in Punjab but a minority everywhere else. The Christians are a minority in every region but not in Nagaland. Caste and linguistic groups are also complexly interspersed.

Therefore, evolving decent, workable norms for power sharing and safeguards for minorities is in everyone's interest — be it the Hindu minority in Kashmir or the Muslim minority in Madhya Pradesh. So far we have been content with making gimmicky gestures to appease minorities, such as declaring Prophet Mohammad's birthday as a public holiday or giving endless coverage to various religious festivals on Doordarshan. Chanting mindless *mantras* of national unity cannot dissolve hostilities. Giving every community secure citizenship rights, equality of opportunity, a share in power, as well as enforcing lawful non-partisan behaviour by the government machinery alone can create the basis for bringing together India's diverse communities into a vibrant democracy.

In recent years, much controversy and passion has come to centre around the Women's Reservation Bill to secure one third of seats for women in parliament and in state legislature. The pro-reservationists see this measure as the most necessary step for women's empowerment.

My party instead proposes a hundred percent reservation for women at the *gram panchayat* level and 50 percent at the *zilla parishad* level with no reservation in parliament of state legislatures. If women learn to take complete charge of public affairs at the village level without the overbearing and corrupting presence

of men, they have a better chance of evolving a better, cleaner political culture than when they come into politics as junior partners.

This massive non-controlled participation of women at the village and district level will provide a rich training ground for them so that they will need no reservations at the upper levels. It is the exclusion of women from politics at the village and community level that leads to their marginalisation at the top. Therefore, my party proposes a thorough overhaul from the bottom up.

However, women can become effective participants in the political process only if we decriminalise our polity and our political parties provide a conducive atmosphere for women's involvement. Our party has committed itself to reserving 50 percent of all posts for women of all levels within the party. We will also ensure that 50 percent of those contesting on our party tickets are women and also screen membership of the party to make certain that anti-social elements don't get a foothold in it.

However, the selection for both men and women candidates will be done through primary elections at the local level. The party bosses will not have the right to arbitrarily bestow tickets for elections on their favoured ones. Without practising genuine democracy within the party, we cannot hope to provide democratic governance.

As we promised in our manifesto, I and my ministerial colleagues, as well as our party's MPs, will follow clear, simple, open and appropriate criteria in making government appointments; we will remove the excessive discretionary powers previous governments have used to unfairly allocate benefits like sundry quotas,

permits, licences and land grants which encourage ever greater corruption. Instead, we will concentrate on making policy, and ensure it is honestly and efficiently implemented.

We will not sit behind closed doors distanced from the people by guns and guards. We will cut down security to the barest minimum and accept the risks that come with our job much in the same way that people in other hazardous professions do.

We also intend to surrender all special perks; we are going to legislate decent salaries for the much smaller government that will be required after we cut the bloated

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bureaucracy. There will no longer be any need thereafter for free housing for government officials, MPs, MLAs, ministers, even the prime minister and the president. There is no reason why the prime minister or the president of India have to live in imperial palaces. We will expect all government officials, ministers, MPs to take care of all their needs out of their salaries just as we expect ordinary citizens to do — no more government cars, no special quotas in trains, planes, for gas or telephone connections, or subsidised land through VIP housing societies.

Each one of us has already released a detailed list of our personal assets to the press and will continue doing so every year. Along with it, we give you this solemn assurance — if any one of us is found to lie about his/her assets or is found

trying to acquire additional assets through fraudulent means, the party constitution provides for immediate suspension from membership of that person and for dismissal from office if that person is found guilty after an expeditious enquiry. Our party will also provide a full public account of our party funds and expenditures. We have made it a policy that even the smallest contributions to our party fund will have to be duly receipted. Any contribution above Rs 500 will be accepted only via cheque — all contributions will be public information, and will only be accepted if all the criteria of our new Political Contributions Act are complied with in full.

I know we have no magic wand with which to transform our country overnight into a place we can all be proud to live in. But as I promised you at the outset, we will not resort to misleading lies nor to jingoistic rhetoric to cover up for our failures and misdeeds.

I appeal to you to watch our conduct vigilantly, subject our actions to thorough scrutiny and keep us on a tight rein. I want us as a people to aspire high, to show the world that governments don't have to be crowded with crooks, that public life and politics does not have to be so vulnerable to power hungry maniacs. We are capable of building a system of incentives that reward honesty and do not persecute those who want to live decent honest lives.

You may well say that all this is too romantic, too impractical. I am aware that the tasks we have set ourselves are not easy to achieve. While we may not succeed in doing as much good as we hope to accomplish, I assure you of one thing — we will as a team try to ensure that, at a minimum, we refrain from doing further harm to this much wronged country and its people. *Jai Jan - Jai Hind*". □