

Keynote Address by External Affairs Minister on 14th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (January 09, 2016)

External Affairs Minister (Shrimati Sushma Swaraj): Today's special guest the Minister of State for Employment in the Government of UK and also the diaspora champion Ms Priti Patel, Minister of State for External Affairs my colleague Gen. V.K. Singh, Distinguished Guests, and across the world Embassies where our brothers and sisters are gathered, a warm welcome to you. This day is dedicated to the diaspora, to the pravasi Indians, and for this I would like to convey my heartiest congratulations.

In the year 2003, under the leadership of the then Prime Minister Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, a decision was taken to celebrate 9th January as the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas. The reason behind this was that it was on the 9th of January 1915 that Mahatma Gandhi had returned to India from South Africa and it was to commemorate that day as the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas because even till today Mahatma Gandhi is considered to be the greatest pravasi and also the most ideal pravasi. Therefore, 9th January was chosen as the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas.

From 2003 to 2015, this was celebrated like a festival commemorating the Indian diaspora and dedicating it to them. In this event, members of the diaspora were invited to India and Central Ministers, Chief Ministers came to this event, and they all talked about the plans in India and for the diaspora, and gave information on these projects, some discussions also took place, and this event would end after three days. Last year, it was the 100th anniversary of the return of Mahatma Gandhi to India and we were commemorating this 100th anniversary. Therefore, it was celebrated in his home state in Gandhinagar and it was done in a spectacular way and it was organised with great pomp and fare.

But last year also the decision was taken that this event which is celebrated every year with such pomp and fare is definitely good but the event ends after three days and there is really no concrete result after that. So, this event went on and was celebrated for 13 years continuously. But on the ground there was not much concrete result that emerged from the event. Therefore, last year a decision was taken that this event would be celebrated every two years and in the intervening timeframe there would be a lot of thinking, a lot of thought

process that would go into it and people would study the various issues and come up with recommendations so that the issues of the diaspora could be addressed and their problems could be solved.

Therefore, this year this event is being celebrated in a very new and a different way. There are two aspects to this event. First of all, this is being celebrated across the world in all our Embassies and Missions. Till now in fact this event was celebrated in India and those people for whom this event is held were actually not a part of it. Therefore, today across the world our Missions are celebrating it and depending on the timezones, those Missions which can in fact be with us are seeing us live, and in fact we would be having a Question-Answer session with them a little later. Those Missions who have a different time zone will be celebrating it separately. The decision also has been taken that this is going to be done every year across all the Missions. Secondly, this event is going to be celebrated throughout the year. We have chosen ten such issues. For instance in the countries of the Gulf, it is the labour issues. For the PIO countries they have their own issues. For the developed countries' diaspora, there they have consular services issues. Then we have the issues of tourism, hospitals, medicine, education, hospitality and it will be our endeavour as to how to engage the diaspora in all these ten issues that have been selected. We have decided that every month discussions will be held where ten members of the diaspora will be invited, there will be five specialists from India, and there will be day-long deliberations. They will then put up certain recommendations which I myself and the Minister of State for External Affairs will sit down and look at these recommendations with these people so that if there is a government role, then we can do and take action immediately. And, the following year when the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas will be held in a big manner, the report will be presented during that event. It may seem to you that the event being celebrated today is very small, but due to these two aspects which I have just mentioned in fact this PBD is going to be more effective than in the previous years.

Brothers and sisters of the diaspora across the world, it is true and you have all noted that since our Government came to office contacts with you have become very deep and very close. Prime Ministers used to travel abroad earlier too, Ministers used to travel too and they would meet members of the Indian community. Usually this would be a hall event or maybe over a lunch or dinner. But it is the sheer scale and it is our effort now to reach out to the maximum number of the members of the diaspora. And when the Madison Square Garden event happened,

everyone was amazed how was it that such a big event could take place! Then people said that well that was the United States of America, a very big country and maybe that is why it was possible. Maybe somewhere in one corner of the world Ms. Priti Patel was listening to this and she took up the challenge and recently as you all know when the Prime Minister went to the United Kingdom, the Madison Square Garden event record was broken and the number of people who were present at the diaspora event was three times that number.

Earlier what happened is after the Prime Minister would return to India from any country, the diaspora community over there would read about the Prime Minister's visit. Now the diaspora, the Indian community, knows about the visit of the Prime Minister even a month in advance and they get ready for that event, they come and take part and it is not just a ritual any more. The Prime Minister speaks to them, he goes prepared knowing their problems, he listens to them, he listens to their pain and once he returns to India he resolves to resolve these problems. In fact this is the way in which contact with the diaspora with the Indian community has increased by leaps and bounds after this Government has come to office.

Brothers and sisters, in those countries during the diaspora event when we hear Bharatmata ki jai, not only people in that country, people back home, or anywhere else across the world, Indians feel a sense of joy and a sense of pride. And it is not just that. I think in the diaspora community now there is a sense which has awakened that there is someone to take care of them, and in case they are in any kind of problem they are not alone and they have someone to fall back upon.

Friends, I would like to remind you that in this short period of 19 months that we have been in office, we have had big challenges four times. It was on the 28th of May 2014 that we took our oath of office and it was on the 3rd of June that the crisis erupted in Ukraine where 1000 Indian students had to be evacuated. Five days later, on the 8th of June, the problem in Iraq erupted where 7,500 Indians of Indian origin had to be evacuated. Even as events were unfolding in Iraq, Libya happened. There we had to evacuate 3,500 people. And then was the challenge of Yemen from where we evacuated 4,500 people. And in addition, 2,500 foreigners were evacuated.

Evacuation from Yemen in fact put across to us many big challenges. In Yemen, the forces from Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni rebels were fighting. The Saudi Arabian forces had control of the air space, whereas

on the ground the Yemeni rebels had control. As far as the seas were concerned, they were under the control of the pirates. But it is with the help of the Indian Navy, the Indian Air Force, Air India, and under the leadership of my colleague Minister of State for External Affairs that this operation was carried out. In fact this was carried out in such a way that this got praise not only from across India but from across the world. Thirty-eight countries wrote to us that they needed their expatriates to be repatriated, to be evacuated. We got requests from the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Germany. The big countries requested us to evacuate their nationals. As I mentioned earlier, 4,500 Indians and 2,500 foreign nationals were evacuated from Yemen.

Brothers and sisters of the diaspora, I would like to make use of this opportunity that has been given to me today to make a request to you. When any problem erupts or there is a very difficult situation in any country across the world, we issue advisories. My request to you is, please listen to these advisories. These advisories are issued repeatedly because that is the time when you can come back easily and later on it becomes very difficult as the situation deteriorates. Even when the evacuation process starts, even then we request everyone to return but that is not the case. In fact there are people who stay back and this causes a lot of pain to their family members back here in India. Some of them stay back and this causes innumerable problems for us. For instance, when the situation was erupting in Libya, 3,500 people were evacuated. But even today we believe, according to the estimates which are available, 2,000 people are still there, and four people were caught out of which two were freed, two are still captive, and two more were caught out of which one was freed and one is still captive. Now, this kind of action causes not only pain to the person who is held captive but also to the family members here back in India. We make a lot of effort. You cannot even imagine the amount of effort we make. Sometimes we get success, sometimes we do not. But please do follow our advisories. Because the situation is dangerous, that is the reason why we ask you to return. Once the situation is normal, then we will ourselves tell you that you can return. Therefore, once again I would like to request you that as and when advisories are issued, please do listen to them. Life is more important than money. A lot of people say we have jobs here, we do not want to leave this. Please do not think in those terms. As and when we issue advisories, once again I would request you to please help us and return.

Today, ladies and gentlemen, is the age of the social media. One tweet is

enough for us. That 140 character tweet is quite enough. When it is sent to me, we immediately press the action button and we start taking action. Sometimes things happen which are beyond anyone's control. For instance, there was an Indian family that was returning to India and the wife died in the flight itself, and they had to make an emergency landing in Iran, a completely foreign land. One tweet was enough and our Indian Embassy officials rushed to the airport and all the procedures and formalities were taken care of and the mortal remains were repatriated to India. There was another case in which a mother and daughter had gone to Bali and the mother slipped in the toilet and injured her knees, in fact broke both her knees and she had to go to a hospital for surgery. The hospital authorities were not ready to honour the insurance cover. A tweet to our Embassy ensured that the surgery took place and they were repatriated to India.

Today given that there is so much technology which is available, one distress call is enough for us to immediately get into action and take remedial action. Why do we do this? Because you are us and we are you. We feel it is our duty and our responsibility to respond to you your hour of need. And this is what gives us inspiration to carry on.

I would also like to use this occasion to talk about the various programmes of our Government. We have three flagship government programmes. These are: Make in India, Skill India, and Digital India. And there are three programmes which are in the mission mode. They are: Swasth Vidyalaya which is healthy school, Swachh Bharat which is Clean India, and Namami Gange which is Clean Ganga Campaign. And we would like the members of the diaspora to participate fully in these programmes.

There was a time when opportunities in India did not exist to really have good incomes and therefore people went abroad seeking greener pastures. There was in great numbers brain drain. People started medicine or engineering and then went abroad. And then of course as the IT age came, the brain drain only increased.

But today India has changed and there are newer opportunities, all kinds of opportunities to earn and make a very good living. Today the time has come for you to come back and rethink about coming back to India. When the first generation of Indians went abroad, they thought that during their youth they would in fact have their professional lives there and after retirement they would return to India. Today the time has come for those dreams to be fulfilled. Please do come back. Maybe

come back with both your legs here, or maybe you could have one leg here and one leg in the country of your adoption. Or you could think of sending your children if they are of income-earning age. You could think of sending your daughter or your son and help him or her by investments, or you could do the reverse, your children could stay abroad and you could come here. But really there are these initiatives which I have mentioned which give immense opportunities for generating income. The three plans which I mentioned in the mission mode are an opportunity to pay back the debt to India.

The land where you grew up, the cereals, the various things that you ate here, the water that you drank of this land, you do have a debt to your home land. I am sure you too would like to do something for India. When I talked about the Clean School campaign, this was basically to build toilets in all our schools. Maybe in the school where you studied there was no toilet. You could think in terms of building toilets over there and you could resolve to do this. Clean Indian Campaign is basically to completely put an end to open defecation practice that has been going on in our country. It is our plan, in fact it is our ambition to have toilets in all villages and all schools. You could think in terms of adopting your village and building toilets there.

Namami Gange is something which is a matter of faith. I am sure all of you back home have a bottle of Ganga Jal at home and once that gets over you request friends or relatives to bring you some Ganga Jal. This is the most precious gift for any Indian. And it is our effort to clean up the mother Ganges because this is a very ambitious programme that we have adopted. Once we bow our heads in homage to Maa Ganga, maybe saying this you could make a contribution to the Clean Ganga Campaign.

Today on this day of Pavasi Bharatiya Divas, please resolve that this entire process of development that is taking place in India, you also pledge to make your contribution.

There is one more thing that I would like to say and that is the status of India is increasing in the world today and for this not only our Prime Minister is playing a role but as a member of the diaspora you too are playing a role. When you see the Prime Minister, when you see him sitting with other Heads of State and Government whether that be President Obama or President Xi of China, President Putin of Russia, President Hollande of France, Prime Minister Cameron of the UK, or Prime Minister Abe of Japan, you can see that he has built up personal

relations with all these leaders and they meet as if they are old friends. But let me remind you, it has only been a year and a half that this Government has been in office and the Prime Minister is able to mingle very easily and very comfortably with all Heads of State and Government.

You have proved your worth in the countries of adoption and your achievements have been tremendous. Today you are the CEOs of very big companies. You are counted among the best doctors, the best engineers, and the epithet of IT super power has been given by you. And in politics too people of Indian origin have done very well. One such person Ms. Priti Patel in the United Kingdom is sitting beside me. Whether it be in the United States, in Canada, very recently elections took place in Canada and so many people of Indian origin have been elected as members of Parliament. In New Zealand in politics people of Indian origin are making great strides ahead. And you too, in your particular area, in your particular domain, your achievements have been remarkable.

This is not just for people who are occupying very high posts. For me it is a matter of most pride, I feel a great sense of pride when I see that normal people of Indian origin in fact are known for three qualities. One is that they are very good neighbours. Whether in good times or bad, Indians always come forward to help. They are very hard working. And thirdly they are very law abiding. And you cannot imagine how these three qualities have given such a boost to the image of India. Perhaps sitting outside India you are not aware of this. But whichever country I have gone to on tour, this is something that has come before me over and over again. And for this, brothers and sisters, I would like to salute you.

Officially we send one Ambassador to each country. That too he may not have all the opportunities to mingle with the common man. But all of you are unofficial ambassadors of India. It is through you that people of your countries of adoption know what India is. It is through your behavior that they know what India is. You celebrate the various Indian festivals with your good behavior. This raises the stature of India immensely. And it is your contribution which also makes people of that country know about us.

Today on this day of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, once again I would like to heartily congratulate all of you. This day is dedicated to you. It is my hope that our love in fact increases by leaps and bounds, the relations

that we have grown as time goes by, and in whichever country you are, please continue to make a name for yourselves, for India and to earn a lot of money.

Once again, thank you very much.