

**Welcome Address by
Ambassador of India, H.E. Ms. Bhaswati Mukherjee
at THE INDIAN DIASPORA CONFERENCE
on 30th September 2012 at
The Forum, Convention Centre RAI, Amsterdam**

H.E. Mr. J.H.C. van Zanen, Hon'ble Mayor of Amstelveen,
H.E. Mr. L. N. Weterings, Hon'ble Mayor of Haarlemmermeer,
H.E. Shri Chandrikapersad Santokhi, Suriname's former Minister of
Justice,
Shri Jasbir Singh, President Foundation for Indian Diaspora in
Europe,
Distinguished Guests,

It was with great pleasure that I accepted the invitation to give the welcome address today at this important Diaspora Conference whose theme "Connecting Communities and Generations" resonates through the Indian Diaspora worldwide as a major emerging challenge. A year ago, Hon'ble Minister for Overseas Indian Affairs Shri Vayalar Ravi had graced the Conference as our Chief Guest when it had been held at the Hague in the presence of Hon'ble Mayor Van Aartsen, Mayor of the Hague. Though our Hon'ble Minister could not be with us today, he sends his warm wishes to all of you and his felicitations. We hope that he would be able to be our guest of honour at the Conference in 2014.

2. I understand that my dear friend, Mayor Van Der Laan of Amsterdam could not be with us today because of unexpected travel engagements. However, the presence of Mayor Van Zanen of Amstelveen, the great friend of India and the Indian Diaspora here in the Netherlands honours the occasion as does the presence of the Hon'ble Mayor of Harlemmermeer. The participation of Suriname's former Justice Minister also underlines the inseparable link between the host country Netherlands, the Indian Diaspora, the Surinami Hindustani Diaspora and our motherland India. As our first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru had said about India and her children:

"But She is lovable and none of her children can forget her wherever they go or whatever strange fate befalls them, for She is part of them in her greatness as well as her feelings."

3. The themes of the plenary session have been carefully selected to focus on both the achievements and the challenges of the Diaspora here, including the symbiotic relationship between diversity and integration in a multicultural environment away from home. There will also be substantive discussions on the role of the Indian Diaspora in promoting the Indo-Dutch business relationship.

4. This event is being held in Amsterdam which along with Amstelveen has indeed become the hub of the Indian business and commercial relationship with the Netherlands. During the second visit of Mayor Van Der Laan to India in May '11, he had stated and I quote, *"I wish to further strengthen the long-lasting relationship with India whereby India's history and cultural identity is tied with the Netherlands."* As he said in the business magazine "Connect", after the visit, and I quote, *"Anyone who visits India and leaves the country has to adjust his perception. India changes at a high pace which is impressive to see. Indians are a hard-working people, great businessmen and entrepreneurs."*

5. In fact, this is the key to the success of the Indian business and industry and its Diaspora in the Netherlands. Over the past 50 years, individual members of the Diaspora as well as different professional associations have made commendable efforts to expand and create a favourable climate for further improvement of business relationships between our two countries. If today the Indo-Dutch trade is flourishing, having crossed the Euro 5/- billion mark, and Netherlands is the fifth largest investor in India, credit in a significant measure goes to the Indo-Dutch business community which has played a supporting role in its own way.

6. Dear Friends, We live in challenging times. Netherlands has just emerged from general elections and is in the process of Government formation. It is important to note that despite the ongoing Euro Zone crisis, the Netherlands has managed to maintain, through fiscal prudence and monetary discipline, its AAA status. As Netherlands seeks to change the Euro-centric nature of its trading relationships and turns towards emerging economies, the trade figures sourced from both EcoWin and Bloomberg confirm that greater export linkages by the Euro zone countries with emerging markets will provide a great cushion. Brand India remains an attractive investment destination for Netherlands. The Indian corporate performance has also been excellent in the last quarter of 2011-2012. It is a matter of satisfaction that both at the micro and macro level, the crisis has not impacted on Netherlands' trade and investment vis-à-vis India. In fact, to the contrary, Indian exports to and imports from the Netherlands have significantly increased during the period 2008 to 2011 not just in goods but also in services. As far as the Indian IT Sector is concerned, which has a strong and dynamic presence in the Netherlands, especially in Amsterdam/Amstelveen area, Netherlands is generating growth rates above 15% for Indian IT companies, despite the existing macro economic conditions. Dutch companies are increasingly looking at offshore firms, especially Indian companies as ideal partners in this

difficult period and are looking at Indian IT services as a strategic growth enabler.

7. Let me now turn to India's relations with its Diaspora worldwide. We have one of the largest Diasporas in the world and indeed the largest Diaspora in mainland Europe, around 220,000, second only to the United Kingdom. There are an estimated 5 million overseas Indian workers who account for 40% of the total remittances that India receives each year. In 2011 India received over 50 billion US dollars as remittances from its overseas workers. India's Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs has enacted important legislation and taken many initiatives in response to requests by our Diaspora. These include, inter alia, the Overseas Citizens of India's Scheme (OCI) launched in 2006. This has been a singular success and has enabled enhanced economic, social and cultural engagement between our vast overseas Indian community and India. Another important and long-standing demand of voting rights has been made into a reality. Indian nationals living abroad can now exercise their franchise in India at the time of general elections.

8. It is a matter of pride for all of us that two leading members of the Indian Diaspora here in the Netherlands - Mr. Ram Lakhina and Mr. Wahid Saleh - have been awarded the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Awards in '09 and '11 respectively. This Award is the

highest honour conferred by the President of India to overseas Indians in recognition of significant contributions in select fields, as a part of the annual Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) Convention.

9. Mr. Ram Lakhina - an entrepreneur with business interests in India and The Netherlands, is a true Gandhian, being the Chairman of the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Foundation. He is also the Founder and Chairman of The Netherlands India Chamber of Commerce (NICCT) and co-Founder of the World Forum for Ethics and Business.

10. Mr. Wahid Saleh is a symbol of the indomitable Assamese spirit, a product of the tolerant pluralistic culture of the Brahmaputra Valley and of his native Jorhat. Wahid's modesty and his humility are only matched by his integrity and his intellect. Wahid was presented the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award in January 2011 for his outstanding contribution to the Indian community in the Netherlands and philanthropic work in Assam. He was also given the rare honour of making the acceptance speech on behalf of all the PBS recipients.

11. This afternoon we would also be hearing the enchanting voice of one of our great artists here in the Netherlands, Mrs. Moushmi Oberoi. After her performance at the last Diaspora Conference at

the Hague, she was specially invited by our Hon'ble Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs to perform at the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas 2012 held in Jaipur, India. This again honours our Diaspora and all of us.

12. Dear Friends, Integration and Diversity - another important theme of today. Our dynamic Diaspora while contributing to the strength of the Dutch economy and industry, has maintained its unique cultural identity and traditions. The Indian Diaspora has been singled out for its harmonious integration into Dutch society - something which re-emphasizes Indian values of pluralism, mutual respect and peaceful coexistence regardless of caste, creed, religion or language. The synergy between the Dutch, the Indian community and the Surinami Hindustani community adds a rich and unique dimension to our relationship.

13. India takes pride in the achievements of the people of Indian origin in diverse fields in different parts of the world. The success of the Indian Diaspora in diverse spheres of human endeavour is living proof that given a proper enabling environment, the people of Indian origin are second to none. There is a growing respect for India in the world today. In this the Indian Community and Diaspora has played a significant role.

14. The Embassy has tried in every way to support our Diaspora. We have implemented a Fast Track Business Visa Facilitation Scheme. The scheme is aimed at facilitating quicker processing of business visas for Dutch Companies whose officials need to travel frequently to India for business purposes.

15. Dear Friends, We meet on the eve of Gandhi Jayanti. 2nd October, the birth of the Father of the Indian Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, is commemorated worldwide and in the United Nations as the International Day of Non-Violence. On the 2nd day of autumn last year, we commemorated Gandhi Jayanti in the Netherlands in a very special way when Dr.Karan Singh, Member of India's Parliament and President of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations inaugurated Gandhi Centre, the first Indian Cultural Centre in the Netherlands. In doing so, he brought to fruition a 40 year old long cherished dream of the Government of India, of the Indian and Surinami Hindustani Diaspora as well as of the Embassy. This was a special moment. The Gandhi Centre is one year old. I take this opportunity of inviting all of you most cordially to the commemoration of the first anniversary at the Gandhi Centre on Tuesday, 2nd October at 6.00 pm when renowned Odissi Dancer Ms.Aruna Mohanty and her troupe would perform there.

16. In conclusion, it is important to recall why the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas which is celebrated on 9th January every year is a very special day. It is special because it marks the day Mahatma Gandhi returned to India from South Africa to bring the message of satyagraha and non-violence that he had used during his long stay in South Africa to fight unjust and racial discrimination, to build a peaceful civil disobedience national movement, leading to the birth of the Indian Nation. Just as Mahatmaji changed the course of history after his return, overseas Indians will play a major role in helping to build a great future for India. India is proud of its Indian Diaspora which while contributing so much to its country of adoption, has also committed itself to continue to love and respect the uniqueness of India and its culture, which we in India call "Bharatiyata or Indianness".

17. On 15th August 1947, in a message to our Diaspora, our first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru had said, and I quote:

"On this day of liberation the motherland sends her affectionate greetings to her children abroad. She calls them to her service and to the service of freedom wherever they might be. Every Indian abroad is a representative of India and must ever remember that he has the honour of his country in his keeping."

He added, and I quote:

"And to India, our much-loved motherland, the ancient, the eternal and the ever-new, we pay our reverent homage and we bind ourselves afresh to her afresh."

Thank you,

Jai Hind.

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