

## **Congress Plenary Session**

18-20 December 2010: Burari [Delhi]-full text

### **Congress President's Address**

#### **I (Introduction)**

I welcome all of you, especially the newly-elected delegates, to this 83rd Plenary session of the Indian National Congress.

Today, we are also concluding the 125th anniversary celebrations of our Party.

And what a century and a quarter it has been.

From the time of its founding, generation upon generation of Congressmen and women have left their mark on our nation's history.

Mahatma Gandhi gave a new philosophy and direction to the Congress, inspiring millions to join him in winning Freedom.

Under the far-sighted leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, the foundations of the modern Indian nation-state were laid, resting on a profound commitment to parliamentary democracy, secularism, planning and science and technology. The first steps to industrialise India were taken. The first initiatives to liberate ourselves from poverty, ignorance, discrimination and disease were launched. The first measures to empower the weaker sections were introduced.

Lal Bahadur Shastri's Jai Jawan Jai Kisan still resonates throughout the country today.

Indira Gandhi gave our Party a bold new thrust with her deep concern for the poor and the under-privileged. Her leadership gave us pride and self-confidence. Her courage and conviction continue to sustain us.

Rajiv Gandhi was with us only for a brief while but in that eventful time, he set our country firmly on the path to entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century from a position of strength.

PV Narasimha Rao gave fresh impetus to the process of economic reforms.

Over the past century and more, our Party has seen many victories and defeats, confronted many obstacles, overcome many challenges. Throughout, it has always shown great resilience and a will to face the future.

It is natural for us to look back with pride.

We are privileged to be inheritors of a legacy, a legacy of vision and values, of commitment and concern.

But it is important for us to reflect to what extent we have stood steadfast to the rich legacy bequeathed to us.

That is the purpose of this Plenary.

We meet not just to celebrate our past.

We assemble here to make a fresh resolve, a resolve of service and of renewal. This resolve is not just a Party calling, it a vital national need.

## **II (Organisation)**

You have all entrusted me with the stewardship of this great organisation for a little over twelve years. It is your support, your hard work which have made possible all that we have achieved during this period.

We are a unique Party for more than one reason, not least because we embody the very idea of India in all its diversity.

We are the nation's pre-eminent political party, the only one with a truly pan-Indian presence and strength. We have lakhs of dedicated workers, like you, throughout the country. They, like you, are the pillars of our organisation.

We are the only party that derives its support from all sections of our society. The only one that puts the welfare of the poor, the deprived and disadvantaged at the very core of its agenda.

There is vast reservoir of goodwill for our Party amongst the people.

We must consolidate these unique assets.

But we must also candidly address weaknesses that have manifested themselves.

We must be more than a giant election machine.

Our doors must remain open to people from all walks of life, from all sections of society. Grand Old Party the Congress may be but it must be more than a party of age and experience. It must also be a party of youthful energy and vitality. We therefore welcome the entry of more and more young people into our ranks. The Youth Congress and the NSUI have launched a major campaign for enrolment in a democratic, systematic, and professional manner. These efforts are already beginning to show results.

Throughout its history, the Congress has been a party of ideas, responding to changing political and economic circumstances. I firmly believe that we must periodically introspect together, and if necessary, reassess our position on critical issues to keep pace with the times. That is why in the past we held the Pachmarhi Vichar Manthan Shivir and the Shimla Chintan Shivir.

In the coming months, we will hold a similar conclave. This will give us an opportunity to refresh our perspectives on crucial national issues and also review the functioning of our organisation. It will be an occasion to hear the voices of our colleagues, particularly younger ones, to bring new energy to our thinking.

I am only too aware of how much work we need to do in some states. The recent election in Bihar has demonstrated that there is no alternative to earnestly beginning the process of reviving the party organisation from the grassroots. There are no shortcuts. The road ahead will be long and arduous but we will persevere and we will succeed. This is no time for despondency. This is a time for constructive action, including in those states where we are in coalition.

Where we are in office, whether at the Centre or in the states, let it not be forgotten that it is the Party that has made the government. It is the primary responsibility of those in office to be sensitive to the voices coming from the Party organisation and ranks. Party workers must be seriously heard and listened to. We must not forget that it is the ordinary worker who is our ear on the ground, our hand on the pulse of the common man.

In those states where we are not in office, a new situation has arisen. The Congress-led UPA government is transferring unprecedented funds to all states without any discrimination. Our party workers have a special role in remaining vigilant and ensuring that these funds reach their intended beneficiaries. They must create an awareness of the role of the our government in creating and funding these schemes. They must counter any effort by the opposition to take credit for them and mislead the people.

In addition, many party workers in non-Congress states have complained to me that our own ministers at the Centre do not fully appreciate their concerns. They make a valid point. Such neglect is demoralizing for our workers who function in a hostile environment. Central ministers must engage with the local Congress leadership and workers particularly during their visits.

Our Party must also engage with civil society and with professional experts from different disciplines in a regular and systematic manner.. I do think it is now necessary to create a professional party think-tank to be run on institutional lines. We will take up this subject in the forthcoming conclave

### **III (Political Issues—Violence)**

The Father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi imparted political and practical meaning to non-violence. It is, therefore, all the more troubling to see the growing spiral of violence in our country.

We are confronted with terrorist groups in Jammu and Kashmir. In a number of states, Naxalites are using violent methods to undermine the basis of the democratic system. In parts of the north-east militant groups disrupt peace and normalcy and have turned extortionist. We would not be serving the national interest if we ignored the true nature and character of those who use violence as an instrument. These elements have to be combated with all the means at our command.

Yet, in the troubled parts of our country, the door of dialogue has to be kept open, the prospect of political accommodation kept alive. That is how over two and a half decades ago, Rajivji brought peace back in Punjab, Assam, Mizoram, Tripura and Darjeeling. This is the only way to reconciliation and enduring peace.

To make this approach truly meaningful we must be sensitive to understanding what causes this violence and keeps it going. In some areas, long-unresolved socio-economic issues provide a fertile ground for anti-national forces to operate and generate sympathy.

In Jammu and Kashmir we must address the alienation of a whole new generation of youth that has known nothing but conflict. Our security forces are facing a difficult situation with courage and fortitude. At the same time, the political process must get new energy and focus. That is what our government has sought to do by appointing interlocutors.

In the areas affected by Naxalite activity, we have to resolve issues of daily concern to tribal communities particularly the loss of land and livelihoods and the absence of even the minimum basic services. This must go hand-in-hand with upgrading police capabilities and effectiveness.

The recent bomb blast in Varanasi is a reminder that we can never relax our vigil. Let there be absolutely no doubt about our determination to confront those elements and organisations who operate from across the border and seek to spread terror, to destroy our social fabric and weaken us economically.

#### **IV (Political Issues—Secularism)**

India is defined by its deep and abiding commitment to secularism. It is a value ingrained in our ethos and culture. For us, secularism is not a denial of religion. Respect for other religions, tolerance and celebration of 'other's faiths and beliefs is our tradition.

The Congress Party has always fought against all forms of communalism, regardless of their source.

What is communalism?

It is the abuse of religion for narrow political purposes. It is the abuse of religion and to spread hatred and bigotry. It is the abuse of religion to polarise our society and to divide us.

We cannot ignore the pernicious impact of individuals, institutions and ideologies that distort our history, that thrive on spreading religious prejudice and that incite people to violence using religion as a cover.

The Congress Party makes no distinction between organisations of the majority and of the minority communities who indulge in communalism and related acts of terrorism. They are all dangerous, they must all be defeated.

An India that loses its secular moorings no longer remains the India our founding fathers and great leaders fought for and even gave their lives for.

As Congressmen and women, it is our sacred duty to honour, protect and promote the secular ideal and always fearlessly practice it.

### **V (Political Issues—Corruption)**

There is no doubt that corruption at all levels has become a disease spreading throughout our society. The poor pay the heaviest price for it, bear its greatest burden. The RTI legislation is bringing about a new culture of transparency and accountability. The Lok Pal Bill awaiting introduction in Parliament will strengthen this process.

There should be no tolerance for corruption or misconduct. We have demonstrated this through our actions. Even when no charge has been established, we have asked ministers and chief ministers to step down, pending inquiry. How many other parties can make such a claim? Can the BJP do so in regard to Karnataka where corruption is rampant or other states? Can the Left parties do so in regard to states where they are ruling? Can anything possibly justify bringing Parliament to a halt? Can the Opposition justify undermining the norms on which a parliamentary democracy functions? Surely, Parliament cannot be held hostage to political expediency. Parliament itself is the forum to discuss and resolve contentious issues.

In this context, I want to say something about our Prime Minister. He is the embodiment of sobriety, dignity and integrity. The BJP's personal attack on him is downright despicable. On your behalf, I want to compliment him for his wise leadership, for remaining calm amidst the storm and for his unwavering devotion to the progress and prosperity of the nation. The Party stands solidly with him.

I believe that both as a party and as a government we must confront corruption head-on. State funding of elections has been talked about in different forums from time to time. We should now consider how best to

take this proposal forward decisively. Beyond this, here is how I believe we can intensify our battle against corruption.

First, there is merit in instituting a new system of fast-tracking all cases that concern corruption by public servants, including politicians. Such cases drag on interminably and undermine public confidence and trust. Why can't we put in place systems that bring corruption cases to closure in a defined time-frame? This would bring the guilty to book quickly and clear those unfairly charged.

Second, we must ensure, through legislation and clear procedures, full transparency in public procurement and contracts. It is the duty of the administration to ensure that there is no subversion of due process. And should it come to pass, whistle blowers must be protected.

Third, we have ample evidence that all discretionary powers, particularly in land allocation breed corruption. I would like all Congress chief ministers and Ministers at both the Centre and states, to set an example by reviewing and relinquishing such powers.

Fourth, we need an open, competitive system of exploiting natural resources. This is something we promised in our 2009 election manifesto and it has now assumed much greater urgency.

Congressmen and women holding office must not allow any doubt about their probity and integrity. It ill becomes representatives of a Party claiming to speak for the poor to indulge in greed, extravagance and luxury. Simplicity, restraint and austerity must be our chosen way. We cannot make this a law. But in a country where poverty is still widespread, let us at least have the moral sensibility to avoid vulgar displays of wealth and waste.

## **VI (Economic Issues)**

Since May 2004 under our Prime Minister's leadership, the economy has moved on to a much higher growth path. His stewardship through the global crisis is acknowledged universally. It is this high economic growth that has enabled us to fund our social welfare programmes and schemes. It has also enabled our government to transfer unprecedented financial resources to all the states.

As we sustain the momentum of high economic growth, we face some crucial challenges.

Prices of essential commodities particularly must always be kept at affordable levels and inflation kept in check.

Our environment, forests and biodiversity must be protected and regenerated.

The benefits of growth must be shared equitably with the weaker sections of society.

Our government is dealing with these challenges. The inflation rate has declined considerably in recent months. Allocations for our flagship schemes have increased enormously. But merely spending more money or attaining expanded numerical targets is not enough.

Subsidies meant for the poor must reach the poor and the poor alone. Subsidies enjoyed by the relatively well-off must be redirected to those in need. It is essential that the quality of public education and health care is vastly improved. These are vital building-blocks of an inclusive society. This is how equality of opportunity and social mobility will reach everybody.

It is here that all of you can play a valuable and constructive role by acting as watchdogs at local levels. You must mobilise and organise beneficiaries, make sure that job cards are given, due wages paid, ration shops function, primary health centres run properly and teachers report for work in schools.

## **VII (Conclusion)**

Before I end, let me say that our future will be shaped not by a magic wand or by any single individual. Our future will depend on our party's capacity to work together as a team and to ensure that our organisation does not pull in different directions. There are always personal disappointments in politics as in other walks of life. I can understand individual ambitions but when they are not fulfilled, the party's cohesion should not be jeopardised. The party must always come before the individual.

Friends, there is a new aspiration in our country. The Congress must recognise this and make itself the instrument of its fulfilment. It can only do so by mobilising its collective political will.

We are a party with a glorious past.

We are the party of the future, It is for us to ensure that it holds out hope for each and every Indian. That is our calling and our obligation.

Let the message go forth from this Plenary that the Congress is aware of its strengths, conscious of its responsibilities.

Together we will build on our strengths.

Together we will honour our responsibilities.

We will strive our utmost to prove worthy of the trust and confidence that the people continue to repose in us.

Jai Hind.