

**Hon'ble Prime Minister of Lithuania,**

**Former Prime Ministers, Ministers, Vice Ministers, Members of Parliament,**

**Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Thank you for joining us for this celebration of India@70. We are particularly delighted to have amidst us the respected Prime Minister of Lithuania and his gracious wife. Prime Minister Butkevicius is a long-standing friend of India and we are deeply grateful to you, Sir, for being a pillar of strength for this relationship. We were honoured last year when you personally inaugurated the statue of Mahatma Gandhi and his Lithuanian friend, Hermann Kallenbach, in Rusne. And we are specially honoured to have you here today.

We are celebrating this year the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> decade of what, in today's parlance, may be called Brexit! 200 years of colonial rule ended for us, not through a vote or referendum against colonial rule, but after a peaceful Gandhian struggle, an approach that also inspired Lithuania's independence movement 44 years later.

India has had an eventful journey of 69 years. From being characterised as a problem-ridden 'unlikely democracy', to being recognised as one that is not just the world's largest, but also one of the most robust and vibrant. These seven decades have often been painful; challenges like poverty, terrorism and violence have dogged us. However, India never wavered from its faith in democracy as a means of addressing these challenges, of bringing peace and prosperity to its people.

Several decades of commitment to economic reform have now borne fruit. In the 1990s, just as Lithuania stepped into independence, India opened a new chapter of economic reform. Consistent, incremental reform has given us rich growth dividends. But today, India is young and impatient. 800 million Indians under the age of 35, seek transformational change, not incremental improvement, and have elected a government with that mandate. We have in place for the past two years now, a government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi that is keen to energise India's transformation with strong, innovative governance. This Government has unleashed ambitious reforms and game-changing initiatives like 'Make in India', Skill India and Digital India, to create the right conditions to bring growth and prosperity to 1.2 billion people.

The results are beginning to show. India today has the fastest growing large economy in the world, with a GDP growth rate projected at 7.9% this year, and an aspiration to grow in double digits over the next couple of decades.

The world now recognises India as a bright spot in a bleak global landscape. India has today become a more welcoming and friendly place to do business, with the most open economy in the world for foreign direct investment. We now hope to make India a single unified market with a path-breaking reform of a common goods and service tax.

India's external engagement has also acquired a fresh urgency and energy. We are delighted that this celebration of our journey takes place in Lithuania, a country that is a very special friend for India. Our friendship has been characterised by both continuity and growing momentum since Lithuania's independence. Today, we have a strong political partnership and cooperate closely in international fora.

Our economic links are growing. India is today a major global exporter of capital. And Lithuania has been one of the recipients. The Indian-owned international group INDORAMA today celebrates 10 years of the 'Orion Global Pet' project in Klaipeda. On this special anniversary, I wish to congratulate Mr. J.K. Malik, Executive Director of the company, who is with us here today.

But the relationship between our countries goes much beyond our political and economic links. We are bound by centuries of cultural connections: for instance, the Sanskrit and Lithuanian languages have over 10,000 words in common.

Our attempt this evening is to bring you a little bit of India. Our films are well known in Lithuania. We love to see them, we love to show them, we make three every day. We have a special representation today from our film industry, since Lithuania's beauty now also attracts Bollywood. I have great pleasure in recognising in our audience today some friends from the Indian film industry. Friends of a certain age in Lithuania would recall *Awara*, and the iconic song *Awara Hoon*, which so many here have hummed; the movie featured Raj Kapoor and the legendary actress Nargis. Today, we have amongst us, Mr. Sanjay Dutt, son of this iconic actress. Mr. Dutt himself is a renowned and respected actor in India. He, along with producer Mr. Vikash Verma, are here for discussions on using locales in Lithuania for their forthcoming productions. We also have a group specially flown in from India which will give you a demonstration of Kathak, a beautiful dance form from the medieval courts of Mughal India.

Tonight is an occasion to celebrate not just independent India's journey, not just our economy, music, dance, film, and cuisine, but also our relationship with Lithuania, our cultural bonds, which give us a place in each other's hearts.

Welcome to India!

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