

**SPEECH BY HER EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRIMATI PRATIBHA DEVISINGH PATIL AT THE INAUGURATION OF THE FIRST WORLD CLASSICAL TAMIL CONFERENCE**

*Coimbatore, 23th June 2010*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am happy to inaugurate the First World Classical Tamil Conference in which a large number of scholars, poets and intellectuals from India and Overseas are participating. My warm greetings to all. Tamil was accorded the status of a Classical Language in 2004. This is a recognition of not only the antiquity and the richness of the language but also of its role as a carrier of great culture containing inspiring messages.

I would like to begin by congratulating Kalaignar Karunanidhi, Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, under whose sagacious guidance this Conference has been organized and Tamil declared a Classical Language. A poet, a multi-faceted writer and a statesman, the Chief Minister, has himself written the 'Theme Song' of this Conference. I applaud him for the literary excellence which he had been able to attain, in spite of a busy life of as a Legislator in the Tamil Nadu Assembly which spans over fifty years and as the Chief Minister for nineteen years.

I have a special place for Tamil Nadu in my heart. It was from Chennai that I began my campaign for the Presidential elections. After my elections, my first tour outside New Delhi was to Tamil Nadu to address the youth at the Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development. Hence, I believe, my presence at this Conference is a part of my continuing association with the State.

The Tamil people have greatly enriched the composite heritage of India and enhanced the cultural richness of the world. Tamil ethos based on pluralism, tolerance and a humanistic approach has contributed from early times to this day, in a variety of ways to the progress of the country and in shaping India's identity as a nation that is rich in art and music, architecture and literature. Tamil language, with its vibrancy and richness, has made India a proud multilingual society.

The Tamil people reputed for their intellect, scholarship and learning, are also dynamic and enterprising. Long before the days of the 'Silk Route', Tamil merchants were sailing around the Indian coast to the Persian Gulf. It was the Tamilians, who around the 1st Century BC, discovered and harnessed trade winds. There is a saying in Tamil, meaning - ride the mighty ocean in quest of treasure, which in essence captures the Tamil spirit to succeed. This spirit, alongwith the creativity of the Tamil people has been instrumental in their success and, I am confident, will continue to bring them success, wherever they are and in whatever field they are involved.

The history of the Tamils is our nation's pride. Many concepts intrinsic to India's society and basic to its polity are found in Tamil discourse over the millennia. For example, respect for each other's religion has long been part of Tamil cultural tradition. Tamil Nadu is a source of both Saivite and Vaishnavite philosophies. A substantial body of work exists on Jain and Buddhist beliefs as well as on Islam and

Christianity. This is an illustrative example of different faiths co-existing and enriching each other through their interaction. For peace and harmony, we also need a world that does not discriminate and that does not tolerate inequality. A principal tenet of the Constitution of our country is to secure social, economic and political justice along with equality of status and opportunity to all. Universal Adult Franchise and our democratic framework have given a political voice to every adult citizen of the country. Fundamental rights ensure equality and prohibit discrimination on grounds of caste, creed, race and religion. Tamil Nadu has also been leading in social reform, fighting social biases and working for achieving a society where people from all sections of society would be treated with equal respect.

As our nation progresses economically, we have sought to follow an inclusive growth paradigm so that growth brings benefits to all sections of society, particularly rural areas where about 60 percent of our population resides. Our developmental efforts are becoming increasingly participatory with more powers devolving on Panchayati Raj Institutions. Evidence is available to show the existence of village Panchayats in Tamil Nadu functioning as self-contained economic and administrative units. These village Panchayats were, in fact, little republics enjoying a great deal of local autonomy with powers of taxation for local purposes. They also served as centers of social life and culture. It is this model of rural development that can bring progress and prosperity in our villages.

In terms of governance, the kingdoms and empires of this region, - the Cheras, the Cholas and the Pandyas were dynamic entities who worked for the welfare of the people and also promoted the growth of art and culture. Under them Tamil culture spread to the East and the West. Pallava temple architecture and Chola bronze sculpture are well known. Bharatanatyam dance and the Carnatic system of music originated here. But probably the most significant contribution is that of Tamil language with its vast literature.

Tamil language is amongst the oldest living languages of the world with its extraordinary volume of literature and grammar. It has been the means through which people have vividly expressed their understanding, aspirations and ideals. Its oldest work Tolkaappiyam dates back to about 200 years BC. Some of the greatest works of ancient Tamil are of the Sangam period. The poets of the Sangam age belonged to all categories of occupations ranging from potters and peasants of a village to the merchants and the noble class. Among them were also women poets. This is a sign of equality in Tamil society. In fact, the message of peace, universality and of the human race being one was propounded more than 2000 years ago by a Sangam poet in the famous lines:

Thirukural written by Thiruvalluvar is a remarkable treatise on ethics. Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, at one point of time is known to have said, "I wanted to learn Tamil to enable me to study Valluvar's Thirukural in his mother tongue itself. It is a treasure of wisdom." I may add here that the Tamil community had been a strong proponent of the peaceful freedom struggle in India and also during the days of Gandhiji in South Africa.

In the library of Tamil literature, Cilappatikaram and Manimekalai are works of excellence as are the landmark epics of Sivakachintamani and the Kambaramayanam

and the soul-stirring hymns of Nayanars and Alvars. Tamil literary personalities made signal contributions to our national independence movement. The poems and songs of Subramania Bharathi evoked, in the minds of the people of India, deep feelings of patriotism during our freedom struggle.

The next generation of Tamils must anchor as well as equip themselves with knowledge of Tamil culture, literature and values. In this context, I wish to emphasize the exhortation of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's statement way back in 1949:

" A language now must fulfil two functions; it must base itself on its ancient roots and, at the same time, vary and expand with growing needs, becoming essentially the language of the masses, and not of a select coterie."

I am confident that as living language, Tamil will evolve to meet the needs of a changing world, even as it draws strength from its ancient roots. The establishment of the Central Institute of Classical Tamil established in Chennai is important in this context.

I look forward to witnessing the grand pageant later today that will depict the rich cultural heritage of Tamil Nadu. I congratulate Dr. Asko Parpola a renowned Indologist who has been conferred the first Kalaignar Karunanidhi Classical Tamil Award. As scholars are gathered here for the First World Classical Tamil Conference an atmosphere of excitement and high expectations and confidence pervades. I hope they will exchange their ideas and bring grandeur to this first Conference and make it productive and successful. Being in such an august gathering, I am reminded of the words of Thiruvalluvar, Meaning, "Men of learning meet each other with great joy in their hearts."

With these words, I wish the State and its people every success in their endeavours for a brighter future. I convey my good wishes for the success of the Conference and once again congratulate the Chief Minister for organizing such a grand and magnificent Conference.

Thank you,

Jai Hind!