

## **Address by the Hon'ble President of India Shri Ram Nath Kovind at the Sofia University**

1. I am happy to be here at the Sofia University, the premier institution of higher learning in Bulgaria, to speak on the theme “Education as an Instrument of Change and Shared Prosperity”. The growth of this University has run in parallel with Bulgaria’s national renewal. It was established in 1888, shortly after Bulgaria gained independence, and has been at the centre of intellectual ferment. For me this is an appropriate institution to meet the student community of Bulgaria and share thoughts on what our people can do together. Scholarship and learning are the building blocks of any meaningful international relationship – as is certainly the case between Bulgaria and India.
2. It is a co-incidence that I am at this University on September 5<sup>th</sup>. In India, this is commemorated as Teachers’ Day in honour of Dr S. Radhakrishnan, whose birth anniversary falls today. Dr Radhakrishnan was one of my distinguished predecessors as the President of India. He was a scholar-statesman and philosopher of rare eminence. In 1954, as Vice-President of India, he visited Bulgaria, and helped lay the foundations of our modern relationship. My address today is dedicated to this great teacher and this embodiment of Bulgaria-India relations.
3. I would also like to use this occasion to pay tribute to India’s teachers, scholars and academics. They have drawn from India’s age-old traditions of learning and wisdom -- and they have contributed to India’s reputation as a knowledge power. They are a source of pride for India. Across continents, Indian scholarship and academic excellence is recognised. It adds to the global economy and knowledge structures – and it earns India goodwill.
4. Like India, Bulgaria understands such intellectual legacies. We are both representatives of ancient civilisations that find mention in antiquity. There is evidence of interaction way back in the fourth century BC – during the age of the Maurya dynasty in my country. Similarities have been detected between the Indian Brahmi script and the ancient Bulgarian script of Glagolitsa.

5. It does not stop there. The mutual fascination still persists. Sofia University has a flourishing Indology Department since 1983. It offers courses and conducts research on India. It also has a Hindi Chair supported by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. In turn, Delhi University has a Chair of Bulgarian Language Studies. Students from Sofia University and other institutions travel to India on scholarships. They are part of a growing international student community in India that comes from 166 countries. I would like to believe that the young Bulgarians who are part of this group come back home as friends and ambassadors of India.
  
6. Many Indian students too study in Bulgaria, particularly at the medical universities in Sofia, Pleven, Varna and elsewhere. Under the European Union's EURASIA Project, our countries are collaborating in higher education. A Bulgaria-India Programme for Cooperation in the Fields of Science, Education and Culture, which began in 1994, has proved to be extremely useful. And among the agreements that have been signed during my current visit is one on Cooperation in Science and Technology. I am confident it will take forward the partnership between our academic and research communities.

Ladies and Gentlemen and Dear Students

7. Education and the pursuit of learning serve multiple purposes. At a basic level, they satisfy human curiosity and the quest to understand the universe that much more, and that much better. Yet, the outcomes of learning are also relevant to solving immediate problems and meeting challenges in our societies. This is especially so with young people who are grappling with unprecedented change.
  
8. The focus of our education system, of our knowledge production and of our broader social and economic efforts is to secure a meaningful future for our younger generations – both in employment potential and in contributing to social wellbeing. Here Bulgaria and India, despite being so different, have common concerns and common aspirations. About a quarter of Bulgaria's population is below the age of 25. In India, 65 per cent of our people are aged below 35. It is the dreams of these young people, people such as those who are here at this University, that drive our endeavours.

9. These are dreams that we can realise together. India would be happy to share its blueprints and its experiences with Bulgaria, as per your country's priorities.
10. India has a massive network of 903 universities and 39050 colleges. Close to 40 per cent of the universities and 80 per cent of the colleges are run by the private sector. The government is encouraging the founding of more and more institutions, particularly for medicine, technology and basic and applied sciences. These could be public or private institutions – that is not important. What is critical is that these institutions conform to quality.
11. As part of this journey, the government of India has recently designated six leading institutions – including two of the well-regarded Indian Institutes of Technology – as “Institutions of Eminence”. Three are public universities and three private universities. They have been given academic and administrative flexibility and special support. In return, they have committed to adhere to a time-bound plan to upgrade and become among the world's best in their domains.
12. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is an era of dramatic technological change. The Fourth Industrial Revolution, Artificial Intelligence, and the maturing of robotics and of 3D and precision manufacture are changing how we live and work. Digital technologies are allowing us to make jumps that were hitherto not possible. In the classroom and outside, technology can be an enabler and force-multiplier. I will give you an example. India is one of the largest mobile phone markets in the world, with over a billion mobile phone users. Bulgaria too has impressive mobile penetration with, I have been told, over 125 mobile connections per hundred residents.
13. These statistics indicate a communication revolution that has allowed our people to leapfrog the stage of landline connections. In India the humble mobile phone and Internet expansion have led to much more than just people speaking to each other or e-mailing each other. They have created an innovation and start-up revolution that is disrupting many traditional business systems but, equally, creating exciting opportunities.

14. This phenomenon is allowing farmers to access distant markets and get a better price for their produce or for the value-added food products that they process virtually at the farm-gate. It is allowing distant communities to reach the formal financial and banking system without needing to visit physical banks. This has drastically reduced the cost of transactions and made business easier to do and practise. The technology and digital revolution is being led by young people from campuses. The university campuses of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are not just providers of degrees but also hubs of innovation and entrepreneurship and incubators of start-ups and small businesses driven by technology – and by creative minds buzzing with ideas and designing game-changing apps.
  
15. This is a revolution playing out in real time in India. It has made India the world's third-largest innovation and start-up hub. And it has made India the fastest-growing large economy. The start-up universe in India is creating not just jobs and wealth – but also intellectual property. In 2017 patent applications by Indian start-ups alone went up to 909 – a fifteen-fold increase from 2016. This is part of a larger story that places India as the world's second-largest contributor to high-quality scientific research and 12<sup>th</sup> highest in terms of patents filed. India's R&D investments are expected to touch US dollars 83 billion this year. This is an exciting ecosystem. We invite our talented young friends from Bulgaria to be a part of it. There are synergies between Bulgarian and Indian institutions that we can exploit to common benefit.
  
16. The surge in technology and knowledge-driven industries has implications beyond the lab and beyond the boardroom. For instance, India's space programme launches satellites for a number of countries and is gearing up to send Indian astronauts beyond our planet. Yet, the true worth of our space mission is in remote-sensing technology that gives our farmers early indications of weather and soil patterns, and so enhances agricultural productivity and incomes. Similar innovations are helping India fight environmental challenges and air pollution, manage industrial effluents, and seek alternate energy sources. India is co-founder and secretariat host of the International Solar Alliance, which was inaugurated earlier this year. This is part of our push to combat climate change and create a more sustainable world.

17. Other potential areas of research and scholarly cooperation between Bulgaria and India are in devising technologies to clean rivers and to explore the potential of the blue economy. From the Black Sea to the Indian Ocean, there is a vast treasure of mineral wealth under the waters. We need to explore and use it, and here too our marine scientists and universities can work together.

Ladies and Gentlemen and Dear Students

18. The 21<sup>st</sup> century throws a great many questions at us. It shakes our certitudes as perhaps no previous century has. Our education system and universities will have to respond and provide answers that our societies seek. And our universities will be our navigators through this roller-coaster ride. Historically, Bulgaria and India have been centres of tradition as well as change. We are societies with deep reserves and long memories. We are also anchor nations in our respective regions – in the Balkans and in the Indian Ocean Region. It is for us, for our people, for our young people such as the students before me, to make our partnership even more meaningful. We are old civilisations and young nations – we know each other's value, and we understand each other's values. And this process begins best when it begins on our university campuses.

19. May that spirit of inquiry and that instinct of learning bind the students of Bulgaria and India – and may it bind our nations in an even closer association. With those words, I wish each one of you and I wish Sofia University all the best. I look forward to your continued engagement with India.

Thank you!

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