



**Speech by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the
State Banquet given by
H.E. K.R. Narayanan President of India
30 October 2000**

Your Excellency President K.R. Narayanan and Mrs. Narayanan
Distinguished guests
Dear friends

India, her people, her culture, her history, her struggle for independence and democracy, her colourful variety, achievements and progress – India, so unique and so challenging, has maintained a special place in my heart and deliberations ever since as a young man I was inspired by the teaching of Mahatma Ghandi and the courageous leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru.

When I first arrived in Delhi nearly twenty years ago, the dream and the reality of India merged into a fascination and friendship with which both I and my family have been blessed every since. The memories of the times we have shared with the Indian people, in towns and villages, in valleys and by rivers, close to the ocean or the burning sands, have given us new visions and deeper understanding.

It is therefore both a great honour and a unique privilege for me to be the first President of Iceland to make a state visit to India and I deeply thank Your Excellency President Narayanan for Your invitation. I hope that together we can strengthen and broaden even further the bonds between our countries.

India and Iceland. The largest democracy in the world and the oldest democracy in the world. Both republics since the upheavals of the Second World War, both dedicated to freedom, prosperity and peace for all.

At the opening of the 21st century the democratic traditions of India and Iceland can serve as an example and inspiration to others.

On the rocky plains at Thingvellir more than a thousand years ago the settlers of Iceland established the rule of law centred on the Althingi, which thus became the oldest parliament in the world.

The people of India have heroically shown the rest of the world that despite the heritage of foreign rule and economic oppression, despite the difficulties in fighting poverty and the problems associated with feeding, teaching, housing, clothing, training and healing a nation of more than a billion people it is possible to maintain and strengthen a system of democratic government where the ultimate sovereignty rests in the hands of the nation.

In a world which strives to make democracy the guiding spirit of the new century, India and Iceland can contribute together to its advancement and consolidation. I see this visit and the dialogue we have already established as a confirmation of our determination to make the times ahead the first century of democracy for all.

Despite the geographical distance between our countries and the difference in their size we can certainly benefit from co-operation and progress in many different fields. Let me just mention two clear examples.

The resources of the oceans can provide riches for the people if harvested in a sustainable manner, and with an emphasis on sound management and market principles they can make an important contribution to economic progress and prosperity.

Both India and Iceland are blessed with rich fishing grounds. In the 21st century the oceans surrounding our countries will become even more challenging sources of food and ingredients for medical and health products.

The success of sustainable fishing in Iceland and the transformation of our fish processing industry into a prosperous high-tech business with global marketing networks has achieved recognition by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization and leading officials at the UN headquarters in New York as an important example for others to study.

India and Iceland could thus explore a multitude of co-operation and joint ventures in the utilisation of ocean resources. It would indeed give me great satisfaction to see the successful Icelandic experience transferred to assist India in creating out of the ocean new sources of wealth and prosperity for the people of this great country.

The new era of computer and information technology, the Internet and global communication has provided both India and Iceland with a

fascinating new dimension in our economies and the evolution of our societies. Thanks to the creative talent of our young generations both India and Iceland have seen extraordinary progress in these rapidly advancing fields. Our competitive positions in the global economy have consequently been put on a new and more solid foundation. Co-operation between entrepreneurs and innovators in this information economy at the forefront of the 21st century could complement the advantages provided by the existing creative talent in each country.

I have high hopes that this visit will show how the new economy provides India and Iceland with a multitude of opportunities for successful partnerships in the world of information technologies. The creative talents fostered by our traditional cultures could become our most important assets in the times ahead and bring new generations advances which have never even been dreamt of before.

We certainly live in challenging times and the world is calling for examples of successful co-operation in order to solve the most pressing global problems, the problems of poverty and economic backwardness, the problems of environmental degradation and the elimination of vital biological resources, the problems of diseases and starvation, of conflicts and civil strife, of how to guarantee human rights, peace and security, how to create a democratic world where the basic needs and fundamental freedoms are secured for all.

India and Iceland can become influential partners in this global struggle for a better world because both our countries are strong examples of what solid democratic traditions and lessons learned in campaigns for independence and sovereignty can achieve. Not only should the seats we share on world councils and in international organizations draw us together, but also, and more importantly, so should our determination to make our lessons and experience available to others.

In the last twenty years I have learned more from my many visits to India than from any other experiences outside my own country. In dialogues with the great presidents and prime ministers of India, in exchanges with officials, experts, successful entrepreneurs and business leaders, in discussions with people in towns and villages, in the colourful back streets of the local markets and in the village schools, in trading with weavers and farmers, carpenters and silversmiths, in playing with boys and girls in open fields or the local squares, I have learned more about the human condition and the importance of co-operation and friendship than any philosophical text or learned treaties could ever offer.

India transforms our feelings and our visions, our understanding and our determination. In its democratic way and against heavy odds India

has succeeded in paving the way for prosperity and development, progress and peace.

Certainly there is a long way to go to reach the results we all hope for. By working together we can move faster and consolidate our success. Such is the spirit which inspires me on my visit. Such is the gratitude and the homage I pay to your country.

May Iceland and India, the oldest and the largest democracies in the world, find ways to show others how together we can achieve a better world.

I ask the distinguished guests to rise and salute President Narayanan and Mrs. Narayanan and to honour the people of India.