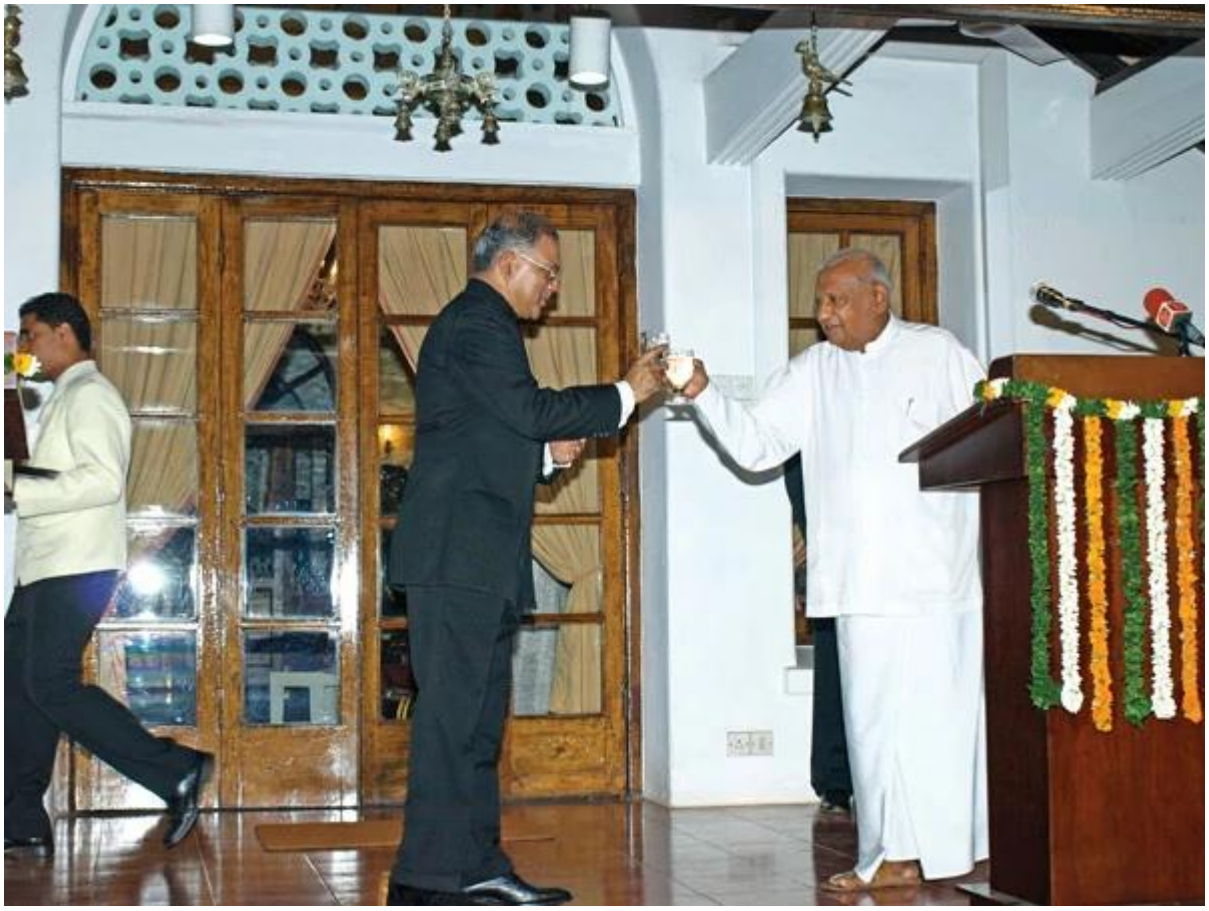
Â€ŒIndia And Sri Lanka Are Making Conscious Efforts To Reinforce Connectivityâ€ Ashok K Kantha Speaks At Indiaâ€™S Republic Day



Hon Ratnasiri Wickremanayake, Senior Minister of Good Governance and Infrastructure of the Government of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Hon Ministers, Hon Members of Parliament, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends, It is my honour and privilege to welcome you tonight when we have gathered to celebrate the 62nd Republic Day of India. I take this opportunity to thank you all for being with us. I am particularly grateful to our Chief Guest, Hon Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake, who is here despite the

myriad demands on his time.

Friends, the past year was both eventful and satisfying for us. The Indian economy showed tremendous resilience and resumed its high growth trajectory. At an expected growth rate of around nine percent this year, India is emerging as one of the key engines of regional and global growth. Its economic momentum has become self-sustaining; yet, there is a long way to go.

India's election in October 2010 to a non-Permanent Seat on the UN Security Council for 2011-12 by obtaining the highest number of votes in the election was a reaffirmation of her role as a responsible member of the comity of nations and as a force of moderation, reason and stability. We appreciate that the vibrancy of our democracy, our commitment to pluralism and secularism and the strength of our economy are acknowledged by the international community. The great challenge before our nation is to continue to reinforce these vital pillars of our magnificently diverse country.

The past year witnessed major developments in our relations with Sri Lanka as we sought to utilize proactively new opportunities offered by the end of armed conflict in Sri Lanka and strong economic recovery in both our countries.

I sincerely believe that it is a transformational moment in the relationship which must be seized. We sought to do so in good measure during the landmark state visit of His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapaksa to India in June last year. The visit gave a big boost to our close and multi-faceted relationship. It put in place a forward-looking and comprehensive agenda for bilateral arrangement which is reflected in the Joint Declaration released during the visit.

We were also honoured by the presence of His Excellency the President of Sri Lanka at the closing ceremony of the Commonwealth Games held in Delhi in October 2010. In a few days from now, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India are jointly hosting the ICC Cricket World Cup and I am confident that this too will be a great success. Cricket is a passion in our region; the décor for this evening's function illustrates that.

There have been many high-level visits in both directions in recent months. After a gap of nearly five years, we resumed India-Sri Lanka dialogue in the framework of the Joint Commission when the Minister of External Affairs of India visited Sri Lanka in November last year. We are now implementing the substantive initiatives

announced during the President’s visits to India. The Hon Minister participated in the inauguration of the work on the railway projects in the North. He also inaugurated a pilot project for the construction of 1000 houses for displaced persons as part of India’s commitment to construct 50,000 houses in Sri Lanka. The visit also saw the inauguration of the Consulates General of India in Jaffna and Hambantota. In addition to the High Commission in Colombo, we now have our posts in three other places, Kandy, Jaffna and Hambantota, which are working to further expand our bilateral relationship and intensify people-to-people contacts. This reflects our strong commitment to our vital relationship with Sri Lanka.

We are happy that our bilateral cooperation with Sri Lanka is expanding in an all-round manner, in the areas of trade and investment, culture and science, education, security and defence, and above all, people-to-people exchanges.

India And Sri Lanka Are Making Conscious Efforts To Reinforce Connectivity In Order To Support More Intensive Exchanges In Diverse Fields.

We saw strong buoyancy in bilateral trade and economic cooperation last year. India’s rapid growth, population and consumer base is an opportunity and a market for goods and services throughout the world. Sri Lanka is well-placed to take full advantage of its strategic location next to a market of a billion consumers and be a preferred partner for India in the quest for shared prosperity. The India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement has yielded positive dividends over the past decade. Discussions on a comprehensive framework for enhanced economic cooperation are now underway and I am hopeful that the coming year will see the fruition of these efforts.

India and Sri Lanka are making conscious efforts to reinforce connectivity in order to support more intensive exchanges in diverse fields. Earlier this month, both countries signed an MoU facilitating the resumption of ferry services between Colombo and Tuticorin and between Talaimannar and Rameswaram. Arrangements are being made to resume the Colombo-Tuticorin service within the next few weeks and the Talaimannar-Rameswaram service in the second half of the year.

The shared heritage of Buddhism has nurtured our relations for over two millennia. We will be jointly commemorating the 2600th year of enlightenment by Lord Buddha this year as decided during the President’s visit to India. The Government of India has commissioned a 16 feet high idol of Lord Buddha in the Sarnath style, which will be installed at the entrance of the International Buddhist Museum

complex in Sri Dalada Maligawa in Kandy, Sri Lanka. India is also establishing an Indian Gallery at the International Buddhist Museum and organizing an International Buddhist Conference in March 2011 in Kandy with the support of the concerned Sri Lankan authorities.

Friends, Sri Lanka is today at a moment of unprecedented promise in its history. This beautiful country already has great achievements to its credit. Today, it is well-placed to tap the enormous talent of its people and leverage its strategic strengths to emerge as a great success story. In this exciting journey, India, as your closest neighbour and friend, is keen to be your partner.

India has always been committed to the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka and to the restoration of lasting peace through national reconciliation. We will continue to support initiatives to heal the wounds of the past and to build a caring society which ensures a life of equality and dignity to all its citizens.

As Sri Lanka perseveres in this nation-building exercise, the Government of India will continue to assist in its efforts to restore the social, educational, economic and cultural infrastructure of the affected areas. We will continue to stand by you and you can always count on our support.

Before I conclude, I would like to say that while we look back on the year gone by with pride at all our achievements in the arena of bilateral relations, the scope for a mutually-rewarding partnership between India and Sri Lanka is truly limitless and there is so much more we can do.

I and my colleagues are deeply grateful for the warmth and friendship that we have received from the Government and people of Sri Lanka. We will continue to count on your support. Once again, I thank all of you for having joined us this evening.

Ladies and Gentlemen, may I now invite you to join me in raising a toast to: His Excellency Mahinda Rajapaksa, President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka;
the health, happiness and prosperity of the people of Sri Lanka; and the continued development of strong fraternal ties between India and Sri Lanka.

Thank you.