

SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA ON THE OCCASION OF THE INAUGURATION OF GOLDEN JUBILEE CELEBRATION OF INDIA'S FIRST HISTORIC CLIMB OF MT. EVEREST

RASHTRAPATI BHAVAN, NEW DELHI: 20-05-2015

It is indeed a great pleasure for me to be present amidst you to mark the golden jubilee celebrations of the first ascent of Mount Everest by an Indian Team in 1965. I extend my greetings and felicitations to all surviving members of the historic expedition and pay my homage to the memory of many courageous mountaineers of that expedition who are no longer with us today. I also pay my homage to all those mountaineers who have lost their lives in their valiant attempts to climb Mt. Everest over the years.

The majesty and the mystique of the mighty Himalayas have always had a special place in the hearts of the people of India. Only a few weeks back the Himalayan nation of Nepal was rocked by one of the most devastating earthquakes in the history of the region causing large scale damage to life and property of the people. I am certain that Indian mountaineers who have been enthusiastically going to the Himalayas for climbing, will use the same enthusiasm in the rebuilding of the lives of those affected by this great tragedy.

The call of the mountains has through the ages attracted pilgrims, poets, philosophers, scientists and adventurers. It is said that the real birth of mountaineering in India took place when Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru set up the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling in the year 1954, soon after the first conquest of the Everest. The efforts of the pioneers of Indian mountaineering led to the spectacular Indian conquest of Everest in 1965 when a 21-man Indian Expedition, led by Lieutenant Commander M.S. Kohli, succeeded in putting nine climbers on the top of the Mt Everest between 20th and 29th May 1965. It was a feat that stirred the imagination of the nation and made India one of the leading mountaineering nations of the world. It also created history by having the highest number of summiteers from any expedition to Everest, a record that stood for 17 long years.

India attempted to climb Everest for the first time in 1960. In that valiant attempt, our mountaineers were forced back on 700 feet from the summit. During the second expedition in 1962, they were beaten back only 300 feet from the summit. Tragedy was averted when one of the climbers slipped but was skilfully saved and the summit team had to spend a night at 28,000 feet which until today remains the highest known survival in the world.

Over the years our mountaineers have distinguished themselves not only by scaling the highest peaks but also as brave soldiers of the gallant armed forces which have included the ITBP. Many of them have served with great distinction during the Kargil conflict and continue to defend our highest frontiers with courage and with fortitude. Along with these great achievements, the first Indian conquest of Everest and the conquest by first Indian woman, Bachendri Pal, has found its place in many text books and has inspired several generations over the years.

We are honoured to have with us today, nine surviving members of the 1965 Everest Expedition. These historic mountaineers are Capt MS Kohli, Col Narinder Kumar, Maj. H.P.S. Ahluwalia, Mr CP Vohra, Mr Sonam Wangyal, Mr GS Bhangu, Brigadier Mulk Raj, Mr Gurdial Singh and Dr Lala Telang. I commend their indomitable spirit. I am sure that they will continue to inspire the youth of this country and the whole world with the vision and the tenacities, which they have displayed during those days.

The Indian Mountaineering Foundation that sponsored the Expedition in 1965 has come a long way since then and has grown to become an Institution that all adventure lovers look up to for guidance. It has always taken a broad and holistic approach in its mandate. In recent years the Indian Mountaineering Foundation has also been involved in environment protection works in the Himalayas. There is no greater service that it can do to this cause than by working for the preservation of the Himalayan ecology and the environment of the Himalayas.

I am happy that from very early on the mountaineering fraternity has encouraged women to take up this sport. The first mixed expedition successfully scaled Nanda Devi in 1981. Since Bachendri Pal reached the top of Everest a few years later, a number of Indian women have joined the elite club of Everesters.

Mountaineering integrates physical and mental challenges, promoting personal growth and awareness useful in other areas of life. It also helps in building a person's self confidence and develop courage and risk taking capacity. In addition to stoking the spirit of adventure, mountaineering has a major role in generating a sense of purpose in the youth and also making them aware of ecological and environmental issues. Training for responding to major natural disasters can be effectively imparted through adventure training which includes various elements of emergency rescue and survival and living in harmony with nature.

I feel honoured to be here in the company of some of India's greatest mountaineers, explorers and adventurers. Your grit, determination and spirit of adventure are a source of inspiration for all our countrymen and women. Your feats epitomize the strength of the human spirit and the limits of human endurance.

With these words, I wish members of the 1965 Everest Expedition, the Indian Mountaineering Foundation and the entire mountaineering community many years of productive contributions in the service of our nation. You have an important role to play in instilling in our youth the values and the character that make a good mountaineer and thereby a good citizen of our republic.

I conclude with these beautiful lines penned by Rabindranath Tagore which would inspire many adventurers :-

"Let me not pray to be sheltered from dangers, but to be fearless in facing them."

'Jai Hind'