



Remarks at the Fifth Annual White House Diwali Celebration

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Ladies and gentlemen, good morning. It's my great pleasure to be with you here at the annual White House Diwali celebration. I see many friends in the audience. I'd also like to recognize Secretary Paulson, who just returned from a very successful trip to India.

The celebration of Diwali has followed the Indian diaspora to all points on the globe and is now a major event for people of Indian origin everywhere – from Singapore to South Africa, Suriname to Seattle. We are proud to share in the celebration of Diwali, for the fifth year, here at the White House.

I have been spending a lot of time helping strengthen U.S.-India relations, but I am sorry that my visits to India have not included the opportunity to celebrate this festival. I understand that although its origins lie in the Hindu epic Ramayana, it is widely observed throughout India with fireworks and by lighting small oil lamps. It sounds like a beautiful way to celebrate.

I think the Diwali celebration offers parallels for the values and bridges that link the United States and India together culturally. So I'll say a few words about that. Because I'm also very involved in our government's political work on U.S.-India relations, I'd also like to say a few words about the politics and diplomacy that are reinforcing the foundation of our increasing cultural and private sector ties.

One important story associated with the Diwali celebration that really struck me as I read about this holiday is that it commemorates Rama and Sita's return to the Kingdom of Ayodhya. Their return ends their epic journey to Lanka after Rama vanquishes the demon Ravana, rescues his wife, and both return to their kingdom. On their way back to Ayodhya, people lit lamps to guide the way.

What struck me about this story is the symbolism: the holiday celebrates the triumph of good over evil. It's an important thing to remember – the celebration of good, good acts, and success in conquering demons. This is something wonderfully universal, for we all confront demons of some kind at some point.

The other thing I've learned about Diwali is how deeply the story is woven into Indian life, and in a surprising way. The late scholar A.K. Ramanujan had written about the many versions of the Ramayana – its many translations, different renderings and interpretations, even different plot elements. Local detail, folklore, and poetic traditions all have shaped different tellings of this epic over the millennia.

These different tellings of the same story have made the story of Rama a "second language" to Indians, with a shared set of names, characters, and motifs that are easily recognized throughout the nation and beyond. Everyone knows the story in some form.

I think this is an amazing thing. The epic can have many versions, but all are part of one shared story. It's a living example of the kind of cultural pluralism – on a truly grand scale – that makes India such a compelling example of democratic pluralism. This is such an important value, one shared by Americans and Indians alike, and one of the great strengths that underlie the U.S.-India relationship. We share this value in our societies.

Today we are brought together to celebrate India's rich cultural contributions to American traditions. This is the fifth annual Diwali celebration at the White House, and that really says something about the growth and prominence of Indian Americans.

Indian Americans are truly a "living bridge" between the United States and India, helping to foster further interactions between Americans and Indians on a range of matters – education, business, science, and trade – that enrich both nations' cultures. Your efforts in the community, bringing people together, guide our way in building a strong U.S.-India partnership.

I believe that the real measure of bilateral ties lies in people-to-people and private sector interactions, and it's very clear that we in government are trying to catch up to the private sector in U.S.-India relations.

We have tremendous and ever-growing people-to-people ties, and a great part of this is the strength of our educational and cultural ties. These kinds of ties are fostered by individuals, but they have lasting impact. Every time a young Indian comes to the United States to study or work, for example, we see these ties strengthen.

The rate of legal immigrants from India who become American citizens has increased from 56 percent in 1995 to 65 percent today. That is a remarkable statistic. It means that two-thirds decide not simply to live here as permanent residents, but to take that next step of allegiance to the United States. I think there is no question that the United States is better off as a result.

Students from India come here to learn, and end up becoming leaders in their fields and changing American life – people like Rajat Gupta, or Indra Nooyi, or the late astronaut Kalpana Chawla.

Duke University did a study on Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, and found that one out of seven start ups had an Indian founder or co-founder. I have visited Hyderabad – and hope to visit Bangalore – and have witnessed the business and personal links that tie the U.S. and Indian high technology sectors together. These kinds of ties serve as a driving force in the growing American and Indian partnership. And they serve as a challenge to government. We are trying to meet that challenge by establishing stronger and more durable U.S.-India ties across a range of areas.

President Bush and Prime Minister Singh have redoubled their predecessors' efforts on what our two countries can achieve together. Cooperation between our two governments has risen to unprecedented levels in the history of our bilateral relations. In the last few years, we have launched important initiatives in areas including education, agriculture, clean energy, counter-terrorism, space research, and economic development. We are working on civil-nuclear cooperation, as I'm sure you are aware, and all of us in government are deeply grateful for the strong support the Indian-American community has shown for this initiative. I believe in the civil nuclear deal and I hope we will see it completed very soon.

Secretary Paulson's recent trip to India underscored the rapid pace of cooperation, collaboration, and innovation between the private sectors in the United States and India. He is working on a major infrastructure initiative that would harness the private sectors in India and the United States to help build what India needs. Expanding our engagement on all levels of government, civil society, and the private sector will encourage India's emergence as a positive force on the world scene.

I have said many times that India's rise to power is undeniably in the interests of the United States. India is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, secular, and democratic nation known for freedom and the rule of law. The United States is also multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, secular, and democratic, known for freedom and the rule of law.

Both of our countries value the importance of cultural differences within a nation. This philosophical value, celebrated and understood by all, like the myriad versions of the Ramayana, makes India and the United States better able to understand one another. From my perspective, that makes the relationship between India and the United States, the world's largest and oldest democracies, a natural fit.

So on the occasion of Diwali, we celebrate not only the triumph of good, but also an epic that can be many different things but always one story. This can inspire us to celebrate our sense of unity and community in diversity, and our commitment to cross-cultural understanding. And it should inspire us to build anew the extraordinary partnership between India and the United States.

Again, thank you all for being here today. I wish you and your families a happy Diwali!

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