



**Aam Aadmi ke Badhte Kadam
Har Kadam Par Bharat Buland**



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Har Kadam Par Bharat Buland**

Lok Sabha Elections 2009

MANIFESTO

of the Indian National Congress



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I. Preface

Elections to the 15th Lok Sabha are to be held shortly.

This is the time for you to choose your government at the Centre.

The Indian National Congress respectfully seeks a renewed mandate from the people.

We pledge to continue our work to ensure a life of **SECURITY, DIGNITY AND PROSPERITY** for every citizen.

The Indian National Congress seeks this mandate on the strength of the performance of the Congress-led UPA government during 2004-09.

We made promises in our manifesto of 2004.

We have delivered on them in a very substantial measure.

The Indian National Congress seeks a fresh mandate on the basis of its core values and ideology — secularism, nationalism, social justice, and economic growth for all, especially for the *aam admi*.

We seek a fresh mandate on the basis of our heritage, record of service and vision of the future.

We reaffirm our unflinching commitment to the welfare of all our people, especially to the well-being of the weaker sections of our society.

The Indian National Congress is the only party that appeals to, and derives its strength from, each and every section of our society.

The Indian National Congress is the only party that believes that economic growth and communal harmony, and economic growth and social justice, are two sides of the same coin and must always go hand-in-hand.

The Indian National Congress is the only party that combines experience and youth, wisdom and exuberance, achievement and ambition.

II. Why Congress ?

These are **national** elections.

While there will be regional, state-level and local issues that are important, these are elections for a government at the Centre, one that will govern all of India in its many diversities and fulfill its multitude of hopes and aspirations.

It is only the Indian National Congress that is anchored in the larger vision of India as a nation, while at the same time being sensitive to regional and local sentiments.

It is only the Indian National Congress that has demonstrated its commitment to a strong Centre, to strong States, and to strong panchayats and nagarpalikas. India's political system must have space for institutions at each of these three levels. Each has a vital and specific role to play.

The Indian National Congress is fighting these elections in alliance with like-minded parties in some States. These parties share the progressive vision and values of the Congress. Over the past five years, the Indian National Congress has managed a coalition government at the Centre, accommodating the views of its partners but without compromising on any of the essential principles of nation-building.

Even so, what India needs most today -- what every Indian needs most today -- at the national level is a party with an All-India perspective and with an All-India presence. The Indian National Congress is the only such party.

The Indian National Congress is the party that, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, led our people into freedom from colonial rule. It is the party whose leadership, by the admission of Dr. Ambedkar himself, made our Constitution possible.

The Indian National Congress is the party that, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, established the foundations of the modern Indian nation-state with its abiding commitment to parliamentary democracy, secularism, economic development, and science and technology.

Learning from experience at every step, the Indian National Congress is the party that has responded creatively to the challenges of the times through the establishment of a vast public sector manufacturing base in the fifties; through bank nationalization and the Green and White Revolutions spearheaded by Indira Gandhi in the late-sixties and seventies; through prudent liberalization and the IT Revolution created by Rajiv Gandhi in the eighties; bolder economic reforms in the nineties; and unprecedented economic growth over the past five years. It is the only party that is forward-looking, the only party that believes a better future is the right of every Indian.

The achievements of India since 1947 are the achievements of its people – of its farmers and farm labour, its organized sector and unorganized sector workers, its managers, its scientists and engineers, its teachers, doctors and other professionals, its entrepreneurs and businesspersons. It has been the privilege of the Indian National Congress to have provided the political leadership that heralded these accomplishments under the Prime Ministerships of Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, P.V. Narasimha Rao and Dr. Manmohan Singh.

Congress vs BJP: Secular, Liberal Nationalism vs Narrow Communalism

The Indian National Congress has always been in the forefront of the battle against those forces that seek to divide and fragment our society.

The Indian National Congress has always been the bulwark against the four “isms” that threaten to tear our country apart -- communalism of all kinds, linguistic chauvinism, regional parochialism and casteism.

At the national level, the BJP has sought to position itself as the main political rival of the Indian National Congress.

The Indian National Congress rejects this presumptuous posturing since the BJP is simply not present in large parts of our country.

Even so, the contest between the Indian National Congress and the BJP is not just a fight between two political parties. It is, in essence, a clash between two competing visions of Indian nationalism, between two competing visions of what India should be.

The Indian National Congress's secular and liberal nationalism has an equal place for each and every Indian. It is an inclusive vision. The BJP's narrow and communal nationalism denies equality and equal rights to large sections of our people. It is an exclusionary doctrine.

The Indian National Congress's secular and liberal nationalism is founded on a celebration of India's many diversities. The BJP's narrow and communal nationalism rejects many of these diversities and seeks to impose an artificial uniformity on our people.

The Indian National Congress practices the politics of consensus and cooperation. The BJP practices the politics of divisiveness and discord. Instinctively, the Indian National Congress unites, while the BJP divides.

Third Front – a recipe for chaos

There is also the so-called Third Front, a grouping of opportunistic parties. These parties have neither consistency nor clarity. They have neither competence nor commitment. This Front, grounded in the politics of convenience, is nothing but a platform for personal ambitions. It speaks of “alternative policies” without spelling out what these alternatives are. Parties of the Third Front do one thing when they are in power and quite another when they are rejected by the people.

Left Parties, who are prime movers behind the so-called Third Front, supported the Congress-led UPA government for over four years. They attempted to exercise authority without taking on any responsibility. At every step, they violated the discipline, restraint and sobriety so very essential for running a coalition smoothly. At every step, the Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, briefed them on all important issues. The Left Parties withdrew their support on the issue of the civilian nuclear agreement even though it had been negotiated and concluded on our own terms. They adamantly refused to listen to reasoned arguments that convincingly demonstrated that the agreement was in India's supreme national interest.

The Left Parties and their present partners pride themselves on being secular. On the contrary, it may be recalled that they had actively aligned with the BJP in the past.

They are, in fact, responsible for the electoral growth of the BJP.

As past experience has shown, the Third Front is a recipe for political instability. Lacking a natural national anchor, it is a recipe for chaos, not cohesion.

Only a united India can fight terrorism

The integrity and security of India are paramount. Terrorism threatens many countries, including India.

Terrorism knows no religion and it respects no political boundary. It is, as has become painfully evident, not confined to any community or any political persuasion. Its method is the mindless use of violence directed at the innocent in the most cowardly manner.

Let it be very clear — terrorism must be fought relentlessly, intelligently and wisely, and without fear or favour. Terrorism can be fought only by a united people, not by a people divided by religion. Religious polarization that is intrinsic to the BJP severely erodes our capacity to combat terrorism.

It is only the Indian National Congress that can deal with the scourge of terrorism squarely and decisively but without weakening the delicate strands that have, together, bound our society for centuries.

Dealing with terrorism aided and abetted from across our borders does not require a “muscular” foreign policy as advocated by the BJP. The country knows the heavy price that was paid for such a “muscular” foreign policy—stupor in Kargil, surrender in Kandahar and stalemate in Operation Parakram.

What India needs is an intelligent and wise foreign policy, a foreign policy that is rooted in our traditions, gives us strength through our unity and common purpose, and radiates confidence.

After the November 2008 attacks on Mumbai, the Congress-led UPA government mounted a forceful diplomatic campaign. It was this campaign that led to Pakistan admitting, for the first time, that Pakistani citizens were responsible for the attacks. That admission was a notable victory for our well thought out foreign policy.

The Middle Path – the Congress's way

Balance—or the middle path—has always been the hall-mark of the policies of the Indian National Congress.

As the world experiences a severe recession, it is this balance that is standing India in good stead.

It is a balance between the public sector and the private sector, with an important role assigned to cooperatives and self-help groups.

It is a balance between building a modern economy and imparting a new thrust to traditional industries.

It is a balance between promoting employment in the organized sector and protecting livelihoods in the unorganized sector.

It is a balance between addressing the needs of urban India and improving the quality of life and standard of living in our villages and towns.

It is a balance between taking advantage of globalization and ensuring that these benefits flow to local communities.

It is a balance between regulation by the government and unleashing the creative spirits of our entrepreneurs and professionals.

It is only the Indian National Congress that cherishes and practices this balance in all spheres of our national life including in the conduct of economic and foreign policy.

This balance is needed now more than ever.

III. Achievements of the Congress-led UPA Government

The tireless campaign of Smt. Sonia Gandhi, President of the Indian National Congress resulted in its return to the 14th Lok Sabha as the single largest party after eight years in the Opposition. She took the initiative to give shape to the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) comprising of the Indian National Congress, its pre-poll allies and supporting like-minded parties. As chairperson of the UPA, Smt. Sonia Gandhi, along with Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, negotiated a Common Minimum Programme that became the basis of governance of the coalition.

The May 2004 mandate was for a government that would be responsive to the concerns of the *aam admi* and to the needs of the poor, the deprived and the disadvantaged.

This has been achieved in very substantial measure.

The May 2004 mandate was for a government that would accelerate economic growth but with a focus always on livelihoods and jobs, on inclusive growth and on social justice.

This has been achieved in very substantial measure.

The May 2004 mandate was for a government that would take forward the agenda of empowerment of the weaker sections of society in a forthright manner with emphasis on education.

This has been achieved in substantial measure. The May 2004 mandate was for a government that would bridge all divides, that would bring all sections of society together, and give them voice.

This has been achieved in substantial measure.

We let the record speak for itself.

The Major Accomplishments: 2004-2009

The accomplishments of the Congress-led UPA government since May 2004 have been tangible and visible. The manifesto of the Indian National Congress for the 2004 Lok Sabha elections provided the foundation for the National Common Minimum Programme that formed the basis of governance during the past five years. The pledges made in this manifesto have been translated into reality by the Congress-led UPA government.

- It has restored secular and Constitutional values in governance. It has also made administration markedly more transparent. The Right to Information Act, 2005 is a historic legislation. It is enabling lakhs of our citizens in villages, towns and cities to demand responsiveness and accountability from public officials and government at all levels.
- It has enacted the path-breaking National Rural Employment Guarantee Act which is being implemented in all districts to provide 100 days of legally guaranteed employment to each rural household seeking employment in public works programmes. Not only has livelihood security been provided to many lakh poor rural families but durable community assets have also been created.

- It has started and achieved considerable progress on the ambitious Bharat Nirman programme to transform rural India by expanding and providing irrigation, all-weather roads, houses for the poor, drinking water, electricity for all poor families and phone connectivity in all villages.
- It has brought comfort and hope to crores of our farmers and their families by (i) increasing the MSP and procurement prices; (ii) by waiving loans to the tune of Rs 65,000 crore; (iii) by increasing threefold credit from banks and reducing interest rates on crop loans; and (iv) by extending irrigation facilities.
- It has launched the National Rural Health Mission which has already made a positive impact by improving the quality and accessibility of primary health care in villages. More children are now being delivered under the care of trained health professionals. Around six and a half lakh women have been trained and posted as accredited social health activists (ASHAs).
- It has significantly empowered the weaker sections of society by (i) giving scheduled tribes and traditional forest dwellers rights over land they cultivate in forest areas; (ii) by providing reservations for OBC students in all professional institutions; (iii) by passing a new law to protect women from domestic violence; (iv) by giving women equal rights to inherit property; and (v) by enhancing hugely the scholarships for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, minorities and OBCs to pursue college and university education.
- It has imparted a new momentum to the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan* for primary education. It has also introduced a cooked mid-day meal scheme in all primary schools that feeds 15 crore children every day. At the same time, it has for the first time in five decades, increased the number of colleges, universities, and institutes of technology, management and information technology. The investment in higher education in the XIth Five Year Plan (2007-08 to 2011-12) will witness a huge increase – five times the investment in the previous five years.
- It has delivered five years of record economic growth. This has enabled an unprecedented step-up in government spending particularly on (i) education and health; (ii) on agriculture and rural development; (iii) infrastructure like power and railways; and (iv) municipal services in towns and cities. This economic growth has enabled the introduction of the *Aam Admi Bima Yojana* (life insurance cover) for one and a half crore landless households, the *Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana* (medical insurance cover) for six crore unorganized sector workers living below the poverty line and the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension scheme for elder citizens over 65 years of age and living below the poverty line.
- It has initiated the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) with an outlay of Rs.1 lakh crore in 63 cities for upgrading infrastructure and for providing basic services to the urban poor. Work amounting to over Rs.42,000 crore is in progress covering areas like water supply, sanitation and urban transport. 14 lakh houses for the poor are under construction. Governance reforms under JNNURM has increased the availability of housing in the 63 cities. A major programme for improving power supply in 1,420 towns and cities has also begun.

- It has ensured that all States in the country received financial resources from the Centre for development schemes and programmes at a scale never known before. Unlike the NDA's record during 1999-2004, no State has faced discrimination in the matter of funds from the Central Government. Sensitive States of the northeast and Jammu and Kashmir have benefited enormously and are seeing development activities on a very large scale. For the first time, the Backward Regions Grant Fund with an annual allocation of over Rs 5000 crore for 250 of the poorest districts is being implemented through panchayats.
- It has earned for India a new respect and stature internationally. Civil nuclear agreements have been entered into with many countries entirely on our terms. India has today a place of honour in every global forum. The sustained campaign led by the Congress President has resulted in the declaration of *Gandhi Jayanti* as International Day of Non-Violence by the United Nations.
- It has considerably strengthened the country's capacity and capability to deal with both external and internal security challenges. New battalions have been raised and new hubs for anti-terrorist forces created across the country. A new National Investigation Agency has also been established. Significant success has been recorded in the fight against insurgency in some northeastern States and J&K. The record turnout in the recent assembly polls in J&K by people braving calls of boycott and threats of violence is a tribute to their desire for peace and a vindication of the approach adopted by the Indian National Congress and the Prime Minister personally. The security forces have also successfully foiled the plans of Naxalites to expand their nefarious activities. We have raised our level of preparedness to meet any terrorist threat or attack.

IV. The Way Forward

The Indian National Congress says what it means and means what it says.

The Indian National Congress promises what it can do and will do what it promises.

The Indian National Congress is irrevocably committed to ensuring that government functions in the interest of the people for whom it exists and for whom it works.

The Indian National Congress has always believed that the correct approach to governance is to address the daily concerns of the people and solve their problems. It is to be responsive and accountable to the needs of the people. It is that governance is a partnership between the electors and the elected and that the perceived gap between the people and those in power must be significantly narrowed.

Dr Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister has led the country with dignity and firm resolve. His integrity, maturity and wisdom, together with his unique expertise and experience, makes him best qualified to lead the nation and handle the many challenges that India faces, both at home and abroad.

Towards faster and more inclusive growth

The Indian National Congress is fully aware that the world economy faces the worst crisis in 50 years. This crisis has been caused by a failure of financial markets in the USA and in other developed countries. However, the Indian economy has shown considerable resilience under the most adverse international circumstances. This is the outcome of the policies of successive Congress governments. This is the direct result of a vibrant public sector that is the legacy of Jawaharlal Nehru, government ownership of banks that is the legacy of Indira Gandhi, and a strong private sector that matured and flowered during the tenure of Rajiv Gandhi and thereafter.

The average rate of economic growth during the self-declared India Shining period of the BJP was just 5.8% per year, as compared to 8.5% during the five year tenure of the Congress-led UPA government. 2008-09 has proved to be a difficult year for growth, yet the Indian economy will grow at about 7%. That is why our immediate priority is to revive the economy and restore the high growth witnessed in the first four years of the Congress-led UPA Government.

The Indian National Congress will put in place measures to ensure that the momentum of growth is maintained. Three stimulus packages have already been announced. Interest rates have been reduced. Credit flows to industry have been encouraged and assured. The impact of these policies will be felt in the coming weeks and months.

The focus of the new measures will be to stimulate demand in the domestic economy and to ensure that there is more purchasing power in the hands of the people and more liquidity in the hands of companies. Public investment in agriculture and infrastructure, which has increased appreciably over the past five years, will be stepped up further. Within 45 days of forming the new Government, the Indian National Congress will present the regular Budget for the year 2009-10 with the basic objective of returning to the path of faster and more inclusive growth, which is so essential for fulfilling all our social and economic objectives

In keeping with the promises made in our 2004 Manifesto, the Congress-led UPA government had set up a number of very important commissions including the Administrative Reforms Commission, the National Commission on Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector, the National Farmers Commission, the National Knowledge Commission and the National Manufacturing Competitiveness Council. Their valuable recommendations will be taken up for implementation in a systematic manner and without any delay.

The Work Programme: 2009-2014

In addition to consolidating and taking forward the numerous missions, programmes and schemes launched during 2004-2009, the Indian National Congress makes the following solemn promises to the people of our country.

- *We will guarantee the maximum possible security to each and every citizen.*

Our policy is zero tolerance towards terrorism from whatever source it originates. We have already initiated the process of equipping our police and other specialist security forces with the latest weapons and technology to meet terrorist threats. This process will be taken forward vigorously. More specialist battalions will be raised and positioned in key locations across the country.

Citizenship is a right and a matter of pride. With the huge IT expertise available in our country, it is possible to provide every Indian with a unique identity card after the publication of the national population register in the year 2011.

- *We will ensure the highest level of defence preparedness and also take further steps for the welfare of the defence forces and their families*

During the BJP-led NDA government, over Rs 24,000 crore of funds meant for defence modernisation were simply not spent. In the last five years, modernisation of our defence forces has resumed substantially. This will continue at a rapid pace. The Indian National Congress also pledges to make India's defence forces technology-enabled and equipped with modern weapons, aircraft, ships and delivery systems to repel any threat from land, sea or air.

Recognizing their special concerns, a new and separate department of ex-servicemen's welfare was established in 2004 by the Congress-led UPA Government. Ex-servicemen constitute a large cadre of dedicated and trained persons. We will utilize them extensively in crucial nation-building tasks.

- *We will accelerate the process of police reforms*

The Indian National Congress recognizes the imperative of police reforms. A clear distinction between the political executive and police administration will be made. The police force will be better provisioned especially in the matter of housing and education facilities; the police force will be made more representative of the diversity our population; and police recruitment will be made more effective and training professionalized to confront new and emerging threats. Accountability of the police force will be institutionalized.

- *We will build on the success of the NREGA and take the scheme forward.*

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, first promised by the Indian National Congress in its 2004 Lok Sabha elections manifesto, has been an outstanding success.

While drawing on the lessons of various social audits, the Indian National Congress now pledges at least 100 days of work at a real wage of Rs 100 a day for everyone as an entitlement under the NREGA.

- *Along the lines of NREGA, we will enact a National Food Security Act*

The Indian National Congress pledges to enact a Right to Food law that guarantees access to sufficient food for all people, particularly the most vulnerable sections of society. The Indian National Congress pledges that every family living below the poverty line either in rural or urban areas will be entitled, by law, to 25 kgs of rice or wheat per month at Rs 3 per kg. Subsidised community kitchens will be set up in all cities for homeless people and migrants with the support of the Central government.

- *We will guarantee health security for all*

The National Rural Health Mission has already begun to make a noticeable impact and will be implemented with an even greater sense of urgency. The Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) introduced by the Congress-led UPA Government offers health insurance for poor families. Expenditure on health is a major cause of indebtedness, particularly in rural areas. The Indian National Congress pledges that every family living below the poverty line will be covered by the RSBY over the next three years. Every district headquarters hospital will be upgraded to provide quality health facilities to all.

- *We will ensure comprehensive social security to those at special risk*

The Indian National Congress will ensure a comprehensive cover of social security to all persons who are at special risk including (i) single-woman headed households; (ii) disabled and the elderly; (iii) urban homeless; (iv) released bonded workers; (v) members of primitive tribal groups; and (vi) members of designated “most backward” dalit communities.

- *We will be make quality education affordable to everyone*

India today has one of the largest educational loan programmes in the world. Over the past five years, over fifteen lakh students have received loans totaling more than Rs 26,000 crore and are pursuing various professional courses.

The Indian National Congress now pledges that all students admitted to any recognized course in any recognized college/university will be provided, on a need basis, either a scholarship or an educational loan without collateral repayable over a very long period.

In order to ensure quality school education for all children, we have already made a beginning by approving the setting up of one model school in every block of the country.

Every year, over the next five years, we will add one more model school in every block.

The Indian National Congress pledges to focus more sharply on outcomes and achievement levels in education and not just on enrolment. It also pledges a major programme for training of teachers and improving the physical environment in schools.

A massive expansion in higher education has been undertaken in the past two years—8 new IITs, 7 new IIMs, 5 new Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research, 30 new Central Universities, 20 new Indian Institutes of Information Technology and 374 new colleges in educationally-deprived districts. The Indian National Congress pledges to ensure that these expansion plans are implemented fully with their twin focus on excellence and affirmative action.

- *We will implement a nation-wide skill development programme*

India is a young country with 70% of the population below the age of 35. To reap the “demographic dividend”, the Indian National Congress believes that there is an urgent need to put in place an extensive skill development programme so that the employability of youth is enhanced. The Congress-led UPA government has already put in place a National Skills Development Mission. Rs 30,000 crore will be invested in this mission which is of crucial importance for the future of our youth. Funds will be provided to ensure its widest possible coverage. A wider and more comprehensive spectrum of skills will be imparted.

- *We will expand schemes for improving well-being of farmers and their families*

In addition to continuing the programmes that were launched over the past five years, the Indian National Congress pledges that every small and marginal farmer in the country will have access to bank credit at lower rates of interest. While the massive loan waiver scheme has already been implemented and 3.68 crore farmer-families have benefited from it, the Indian National Congress now pledges to extend interest relief to all farmers who repay bank loans on schedule.

The Indian National Congress is determined to ensure that farming becomes a profitable occupation. All measures in support of this objective will be taken. Programmes for agricultural diversification, agri-processing and rural industrialization will be pursued systematically. Dairying, aquaculture, fisheries, horticulture and sericulture will receive an additional boost. The special needs of crops like tea, coffee, rubber, spices, cashew and coconut will be met. A renewed emphasis will be placed on wasteland development and afforestation.

The Indian National Congress will implement comprehensive crop insurance schemes and will also examine the feasibility of direct income support to farmers in the ecologically vulnerable regions of the country. Minimum Support Price (MSP) and procurement will be ensured at the doorsteps of farmers.

All controls on the free movement of farm commodities and processing of agricultural products and all regulations that depress incomes of farmers will be systematically eliminated.

The Indian National Congress is firmly committed to ensuring that farmers get, at a very minimum, market rates for the land that is acquired for industrial projects. The Indian National Congress also believes that farmers should be given an option to become stakeholders in such industrial ventures. As a matter of priority, the National Rehabilitation and Resettlement Bill, 2007, that could not be passed because of the obstructionist tactics of the BJP, will be taken up for passage in the 15th Lok Sabha. The Land Acquisition Act, 1894 will also be amended to ensure that the interests of land-owners are more than adequately protected.

- *We will democratize and professionalize the functioning of cooperatives*

The Indian cooperative movement comprising about 5 lakh cooperatives with more than 22 crore members is the largest such movement in the world. It plays a crucial role in our development. The Indian National Congress has always stood for its democratic, autonomous and professional functioning and this will be ensured by enacting appropriate laws, including making a Constitutional provision.

- *We will give even greater impetus to the empowerment of weaker sections of society.*

The empowerment of the weaker sections of society — scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, OBCs, minorities and women — has been an article of faith with the Indian National Congress. This will be carried forward with emphasis on education, particularly skill-based and professional education.

Education at all stages — primary, secondary and university — will be free in all respects for boys and girls belonging to dalit and adivasi communities.

Coaching fees for all entrance exams for at least one lakh scheduled caste/scheduled tribe students every year will be paid by the Central Government. National scholarships for boys and girls belonging to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes will be further increased.

The Indian National Congress will take steps to ensure that allocations under the Special Component Plan for scheduled castes and the Tribal Sub-Plan for scheduled tribes (first introduced by Indira Gandhi over three decades ago) are made in accordance with their proportions in the population.

An unprecedented special drive was launched by the Prime Minister and over 53,000 vacancies in government have been filled through direct recruitment or promotion of members belonging to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. This drive will continue.

The Indian National Congress is deeply committed to pursuing affirmative action for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in the private sector. It has already initiated a national debate on this issue. It also pledges to carve out a reservation for the economically weaker sections of all communities without prejudice to existing reservations for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and OBCs.

For the first time, a separate Ministry of Minority Affairs was created in May 2004 and the Rajinder Sachar Committee was set up to look into the social, economic and educational status of the Muslim community in the country. The implementation of the recommendations of the Sachar Committee is already under way and an Equal Opportunity Commission will be established by law. Nearly four lakh scholarships have been awarded over the past two years alone for pre-matric, post-matric and professional courses, with more than 50% of these being awarded to girl students. The Prime Minister's 15-point programme was launched in June 2006 with physical and financial targets for minorities in all welfare programmes of the Central Government. A special development package for the 90 minority-concentration districts in different states has been introduced.

The Indian National Congress is irrevocably committed to ensuring that the Constitutional rights of all minorities are protected fully, that the representation of minorities in public administration increases substantially, and that minorities recognize that the government is working for their welfare at all times. The Indian National Congress has pioneered reservations for minorities in Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh in government employment and education on the basis of their social and economic backwardness. We are committed to adopt this policy at the national level. A Wakf Development Corporation will be established to develop wakf properties. A National Unani University will be set up. The corpus of the Maulana Azad Educational Foundation will be doubled.

The Indian National Congress introduced reservation for women in panchayats and nagarpalikas. Today, about 40% of the elected representatives in panchayats are women, compared to a reservation of 33% mandated for them. This is nothing short of a quiet revolution. The Indian National Congress will ensure that the Bill for reserving 33% of the seats in the Lok Sabha and the State legislatures is passed in the 15th Lok Sabha and that the elections to the 16th Lok Sabha are held on the basis of one-third reservation for women.

Over the next five years, the Indian National Congress will endeavour to ensure that at least half of the country's rural women population will be enrolled as members of self-help groups linked with banks and that they will get loans from banks at moderate interest rates. The Indian National Congress also proposes to reserve one-third of all central government jobs for women.

The Indian National Congress believes that, in addition to education, business development programmes are needed on a larger-scale for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women. Preferential policies will be adopted in government contracts to stimulate entrepreneurial activities amongst these groups.

Social security schemes for occupations like weavers, fishermen and fisherwomen, toddy tappers, leather workers, plantation labour, construction labour, mine workers and beedi workers will be expanded.

The Indian National Congress is deeply committed to ensuring equality of opportunity and full participation of persons with disabilities, including the blind, in all sectors of life. To begin with, a comprehensive review of laws and programmes will be undertaken and the shortcomings noticed in their implementation will be removed.

- *We will combat communalism of all kinds and caste atrocities with determination*

The Indian National Congress reiterates its unflinching resolve to combat communalism of all kinds and to deal ruthlessly with those perpetrating atrocities on weaker sections like dalits and women. The Indian National Congress believes in ensuring the right to compensation and rehabilitation for all victims of communal, ethnic and caste violence on standards and levels that are binding on every government. The Indian National Congress will propose a law that empowers the National Human Rights Commission to monitor investigation and trial in all cases of communal and caste violence.

The Indian National Congress will bring school curricula of various communal and sectarian organizations — regardless of their affiliation — under the regulatory purview of an empowered national body.

- *We will bring a sharp focus on the special needs of children, especially the girl child*

For the first time, a National Commission for Protection of Child Rights was established in 2006. The Commission's mandate is to ensure that the welfare of children as guaranteed by various laws is protected and promoted. New laws have also been passed to prohibit child labour and child marriage. New schemes to improve the nutritional status of children, especially girls, and to educate them have been launched in the past five years. Over 18 lakh anganwadi workers and helpers have benefited from an increase in their remuneration last year.

The Indian National Congress commits itself to the universalisation of the ICDS by March 2012 and to provide an anganwadi in every habitation and full coverage of children up to the age of six for food, nutrition and pre-school education. The special requirements of children of migrant workers in towns and cities will be met through new programmes in association with civil society organizations. A number of programmes have already been launched to combat the still widely-prevalent phenomenon of child malnutrition and these will be infused with an even greater sense of urgency.

The Indian National Congress will introduce special incentives for the girl child to correct the adverse sex ratio and to ensure education of girl children. Girl children in districts that have an adverse sex ratio and/or low enrolment of girls, monetary incentives will be given to the girl child to be credited to the girl child's account on her completing primary school, middle school, secondary school and higher secondary school.

- *We will make elected panchayat institutions financially strong*

Thanks entirely to the tireless efforts of Rajiv Gandhi, there are some 2,50,000 elected panchayat bodies all over the country with almost 32 lakh elected representatives. It is through such institutions that we will ensure inclusive governance which is essential for inclusive economic growth. The Indian National Congress is unwavering in its commitment to full Constitutionally-mandated devolution of funds, functions and functionaries to the panchayats. The annual allocations to gram panchayats that can be used for purposes designated as priority by the gram sabha will be substantially stepped up.

The Indian National Congress will also upgrade the technical capabilities of panchayat institutions and ensure that information technology is used extensively to enhance their effectiveness.

- *We will connect all villages to a broadband network in three years time*

While connectivity across the country has increased manifold in recent years, the Indian National Congress pledges to bring the fruits of the IT revolution to more cities and towns. It also pledges to connect every village to a broadband network within three years. This will help locate new, non-agricultural jobs in villages and open vast new opportunities for our rural youth. Thus the vision of Rajiv Gandhi — the use of IT for rural transformation -- will be realized in even greater measure. Already, IT is being used in areas like computerization of land records but we now promise a bolder, time-bound initiative.

- *We will give special focus to the small entrepreneur and to small and medium enterprises*

Small and medium enterprises and the self-employed are the backbone of our industrial and service economy. They are the major generators of productive employment for our youth. The Indian National Congress pledges a "new deal" for SMEs and for first-generation entrepreneurs by assuring them greater access to collateral-free credit, liberating them from the multiplicity of laws and forms, and freeing them from the clutches of inspectors.

The Indian National Congress pledges a targeted cluster-based approach to the growth of SMEs. There are a very large number of such clusters already in different areas like textiles, food processing, handlooms and handicrafts, consumer goods, khadi, coir and other traditional industries, and engineering. These clusters, mostly in small and medium towns, will be given access to finance, technology and marketing and will be provided vastly improved infrastructure.

- *We will maintain the path of high growth with fiscal prudence and low inflation*

As the experience of 2004-09 demonstrates so vividly, rapid economic growth creates opportunities for increased government expenditure in vital areas like education, health, agriculture, social security and infrastructure. Average growth in the first four years of the Congress-led UPA government was 9% per year for the first time in our history. We will strive to maintain this momentum with a relentless emphasis on growth that accelerates the generation of productive jobs for our youth. The Indian National Congress is also firmly committed to maintaining high growth with low inflation, particularly in relation to prices of essential agricultural and industrial commodities.

The Indian National Congress reiterates its commitment to the path of fiscal responsibility so that the ability of the Centre to invest in essential social and physical infrastructure is continuously enhanced. This will require that all subsidies reach only the truly needy and poor sections of our society. The Indian National Congress will continue its efforts to create and implement a national consensus on this issue.

Both the public sector and private sector are essential for India's continued high growth success story. The Indian National Congress rejects the policy of blind privatization followed by the BJP-led NDA government, but believes that the Indian people have every right to own part of the shares of public sector companies while the government retains majority shareholding. Public sector enterprises in the manufacturing sector (like energy, transport and telecom) and in the financial sector (like banks and insurance companies) will remain in the public sector and will be given all support to grow and become competitive.

The manufacturing industry in India has seen a revival in recent years and this will be sustained and deepened, particularly labour-intensive manufacturing. The emphasis in all foreign investment policies will be maximization of local value-addition and export potential. The Indian National Congress will ensure that the policies it has put in place for attracting private investment for oil exploration will also be followed for other mineral resources, including coal and iron-ore.

The Indian National Congress remains committed to ensuring the highest standards of corporate governance in private companies, especially to protect the interests of small shareholders and small investors. Regulations will be made to ensure good corporate governance, ethical business practices and accountability to all stakeholders.

- *We will introduce the goods and services tax from April 1, 2010.*

The Congress-led UPA government successfully implemented VAT throughout the country. This has brought abundant revenues to all States. The Indian National Congress now pledges to take the next decisive step and introduce a moderate goods and services tax (GST). Once GST is implemented, all other central and state-level indirect taxes such as VAT, excise duty, service tax, entertainment tax, luxury tax, etc. will stand abolished and bring substantial relief to the *aam admi*. GST will create a seamless national common market for our farmers, artisans and entrepreneurs and will boost employment. State finances, and more importantly the finances of panchayats and nagarpalikas, will be put on a sound foundation.

- *We will give a completely new look to urban governance*

While the bulk of our population still lives and works in villages, India is rapidly urbanizing. But the provision of basic infrastructure in towns and cities has not kept pace with its requirements. A massive programme of low-cost social housing and sanitation is needed to make our urban areas more livable. Recognizing that our towns and cities are engines of creativity and innovation, the Indian National Congress pledges to create a new model of urban administration with financially-viable self-government institutions as the pivot.

- *We will offer a new deal to our youth to participate in governance*

The Indian National Congress has always been the party that has reposed its confidence in youth. It was Rajiv Gandhi who gave all 18 year-olds the right to vote and it was he who declared Swami Vivekananda's birthday on January 12th as National Youth Day. The IT revolution that has spread in our country has opened up whole new avenues for our youth.

The Indian National Congress will design and launch a voluntary national youth corps which would enable young men and women in the age group of 18-23 to serve up to two years in constructive nation-building activities for which they will be suitably compensated.

The Indian National Congress will also make a beginning to induct youth into organs of government. As a beginning, it will reserve a proportion of seats in panchayats and nagarpalikas for men and women below the age of 35 years without detriment to the existing reservations for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, OBCs and women.

The Indian National Congress has periodically renewed itself by inducting young men and women into the Party and entrusting them with responsibilities. Under the leadership of Rahul Gandhi, the Indian National Congress has launched a unique exercise to bring youth from all sections of society and all walks of life into the political mainstream through the Indian Youth Congress (IYC) and the National Students Union of India (NSUI). For the very first time in any political party, there are hundreds of elected youth leaders in Punjab and Uttarakhand. This exercise is now being conducted in Gujarat and Tamil Nadu and will soon encompass other parts of the country. This is a practical demonstration of the deep commitment of the Indian National Congress to open new political space and opportunities to our youth.

- *We will protect India's natural environment and take steps to rejuvenate it*

The Indian National Congress has declared the sacred Ganga as a "national river". The Ganga River Basin Authority has been established with the Prime Minister at its head for ensuring that development needs are met in an ecologically sustainable manner. This Authority will be accorded the highest priority. Water security is of paramount concern to the Indian National Congress and steps will be taken to enhance it measurably for local communities.

India has an enormously rich biodiversity that is under threat on account of various reasons. The Indian National Congress commits itself to strengthening people's movements whose objective will be to protect and preserve our bio-resources and ensure their sustainable use.

Climate change has now emerged as a serious challenge for the world community. India too has begun to feel its impact in different ways. The Congress-led UPA government has already unveiled a National Action Plan for Climate Change. It is an acknowledgment of our responsibility to take credible actions within the overall framework of meeting the development aspirations of our people for higher economic growth and a higher standard of living. This action plan will be implemented in letter and spirit.

- *We will carry out a massive renewal of our extensive science and technology infrastructure*

One of the most outstanding legacies of Jawaharlal Nehru is the vast infrastructure for science and technology that India possesses and which has made so many far-reaching contributions to the country's progress — in agriculture, nuclear energy, defence, space, industry, energy, telecom and IT. The Indian National Congress is firmly committed to extend full support to the modernization and expansion of our science and technology institutions and will ensure that they attract and retain the best talent from India and abroad.

- *We will pursue judicial reforms to cut delays in courts*

Although delays in the Supreme Court have come down appreciably in recent years, delays in High Courts and district courts are still unacceptably high. The Indian National Congress has always been of the view that justice delayed is justice denied and will therefore pursue judicial reforms to ensure timely completion of the hearing and disposal of cases. As a reflection of this priority, the Gram Nyayalaya Act, a key promise of our 2004 Manifesto, was passed by Parliament last year. Setting up of Gram Nyayalayas at the headquarters of the intermediate panchayats and mobile courts in the rural areas will bring to the *aam admi* speedy, affordable and substantial justice.

- *We will continue to be sensitive to regional aspirations*

The Indian National Congress is aware that in some large states the persistence of intra-regional imbalances in development has given rise to the demand for separate states. While it has launched a number of special programmes and schemes for such regions, recognising the legitimacy of these concerns and acknowledging that solution may vary from one state to another, the Indian National Congress will find pragmatic solutions to deal with these demands.

- *We will ensure energy security for our country*

The last two years have seen a very sharp turnaround in the addition to power generating capacity. This momentum will be maintained and it will be ensured that the country adds at least 12,000-15,000 mw of capacity every year through a mix of sources—coal, hydel, nuclear and renewables. Rural electrification and reduction in distribution losses will be given the highest priority. The Indian National Congress promises a very significant increase in the share of nuclear power, both through domestic and imported technology which has now been made possible by the civil nuclear agreements. The pace of oil and gas exploration will be intensified. India's oil diplomacy will be pursued aggressively. The Indian National Congress will implement a scheme to supply energy to poor families at affordable prices.

- *We will take further steps to preserve and promote our heritage*

India has an extraordinarily rich heritage going back centuries. The Indian National Congress will take further steps to protect, preserve and promote this heritage and ensure that its value is fully appreciated, especially by the younger generation particularly. A statutory National Commission for Heritage Sites will be made fully operational. This will be an important instrument to strengthen the foundations of our pluralistic culture and inheritances.

- *We will continue to pursue an independent, pro-India foreign policy*

The Indian National Congress has always upheld India's supreme national interests and has often braved criticism and opposition both at home and abroad in defending the country's interests. At the same time, the Indian National Congress has always believed that it is India's historic destiny to be engaged and connected with the rest of the world and, in particular, with the countries of Asia.

The foreign policy followed in the past five years has yielded handsome results: the foremost example is the agreements on civil nuclear cooperation signed with the USA, Russia, France and Kazakhstan.

India's well-thought out foreign policy and its patient but forceful diplomacy has obliged Pakistan to admit that its citizens were responsible for carrying out the dastardly attacks in Mumbai in November 2008. The Indian National Congress has striven for an enduring peace and for close economic relations with Pakistan. The Indian National Congress has also encouraged extensive people-to-people contacts between the two countries, particularly amongst the younger generation. But the Mumbai attacks have cast a long shadow on the on-going dialogue and engagement process. It is now entirely upto Pakistan to break the impasse by taking credible action against those responsible for the carnage in Mumbai. If it does so and dismantles the terrorist networks that operate from its soil, a Congress-led government will not be found wanting in its response.

The long-held policy of the Indian National Congress is that the Government of Sri Lanka should find an honourable solution to the strife in that country and ensure that all communities, especially the Tamil-speaking people, are guaranteed and enjoy equal rights within the framework of a united Sri Lanka. The Indian National Congress offers to help the parties reach an agreement as envisaged in the India-Sri Lanka Peace Accord of 1987 which remains the only basis for a politically negotiated settlement.

The Indian National Congress welcomes the return of multi-party democracy to Bangladesh and Nepal. It will work with both countries to deepen bilateral ties across a wide spectrum of areas for demonstrable mutual benefit. The Indian National Congress also believes that the two countries must take note of India's security concerns in a more meaningful manner.

The Indian National Congress has always championed the legitimate and peaceful aspirations of the long-suffering Palestinian people and urges that a viable Palestinian state be established at the earliest.

India's relationships with countries like the USA, Russia, China and Japan and with countries of Europe have been transformed by sustained diplomatic efforts since 2004. These relationships will be further deepened. India has begun a whole new process of engagement with the countries of Africa where there is great appreciation of what India has to offer to them. This engagement will be expanded.

- *The Indian National Congress will intensify the involvement of overseas Indians in development*

The Indian National Congress takes great pride, as does the entire country, in the outstanding accomplishments of overseas Indians in different fields. The Indian National Congress also acknowledges the vital role remittances by overseas Indians play in bolstering the country's finances. The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs was created in May 2004 to reflect the priority that the Indian National Congress places on maximizing the contributions of the overseas Indian community to our country's economic, scientific and technological progress. A number of measures have been taken to protect the interests of lakhs of Indian workers in the Middle East. This will continue to be a matter of priority. New opportunities will be created for overseas Indians to play their rightful role in the renewal of institutions of higher learning and in starting new ventures and businesses. Four new universities will be established with 50% of the seats reserved for PIO/NRI students.

