



Speech
by President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at the State Dinner
in honour of
the President of India
HE Ram Nath Kovind and
First Lady Savita Kovind

Bessastaðir
10 September 2019

President Ram Nath Kovind,
First Lady Savita Kovind,
President of the Althingi, ministers,
honoured guests, dear friends

On behalf of Eliza and myself, and the people of Iceland, I heartily welcome you to Iceland, Mr President and Mrs Kovind. I hope you will enjoy your stay here, and return home with happy memories. And I am pleased that your visit has already strengthened the excellent relationship between our two countries. Of great importance are the three Agreements of Cooperation which have been signed here at Bessastaðir. And your lecture at the University of Iceland, Mr. President, was well received. We in Iceland are delighted that visitors to our country place priority on collaboration for a green future for the planet and for humankind. In the end, we have no other option.

Mr President and Mrs Kovind! We can be optimistic, and have faith in our capacity to respond, to learn important lessons and to take necessary measures. Here in Iceland we observed India's recent lunar mission – a project which is a sign of your country's ambition and quest for greater knowledge, a project which spurs innovative thinking and solutions, hopefully for the benefit of all. Knowledge is the premise of progress, the premise for a better life for humanity as a whole.

Allow me to mention an old tale that connects our two countries: the first Icelander, so far as we know, to visit India was one Jón Ólafsson, who was born in the late 16th century. In search of adventure, he left Iceland to travel the world. His first port of call was Copenhagen, which was then Iceland's capital city, as the country was under Danish rule. In his autobiography Jón recounts entering a tavern there; a local man was giving a colourful and exaggerated account of various strange and exotic peoples – including the “pitiful tribe” that inhabited Iceland. Finally, our Jón had had enough. He accosted the conceited loudmouth, and resolutely said: “My friend, I can hear that you know much about foreign lands, and can tell fine tales. And not least am I surprised that you know so much of Icelandic ways. Have you sailed there?”

Prejudice and ignorance have long been a nuisance. No, the man admitted, he had never been to Iceland, nor did he ever want to. That was enough for Jón who slapped the man. Uproar followed, and the braggart made his escape. But the publican commended Jón for his courage, “and said that I was worthy of praise,” as the Icelander recounted later, “that I had taken such vengeance on him for his disparaging of my fatherland.”

Violence should never be praised – and neither should chauvinism. “Inside-out and twisted patriotism has often provided the spark, when the embers of warfare have been blown into flame,” said Sigurbjörn Einarsson, Bishop of Iceland in the latter half of the last century. Healthy patriotism, on the other hand, is praiseworthy. We can uphold a love of country which entails tolerance and respect for different customs and nations, while we stand guard over human rights for all, near and far, fairness and freedom, gender equality and dignity.

Jón Ólafsson travelled all the way to India, and he had plenty to say about that faraway place, that huge land which boasted “great pearls, gems, marvellous fruits and spices, and other splendid and magnificent goods.” – But the food was very different from what this Icelandic farmer's son was accustomed to: “In general the Indians have their boiled food heavily spiced with saffron broth, always fresh and fried in oil.”

Mr President! India's history is the history of a remarkable nation with a remarkable past. Today India is a major player on the world stage, and faces many challenges at home each day. In addition, it has been predicted that within a decade India will be the most populous nation on earth. We offer a warm welcome to the president of this growing international power, with whom we want to trade, for our benefit and yours. And although we are separated by wide oceans, just as in the days of Jón Ólafsson the India-Traveller, and although we in Iceland are one of the world's smaller nations, and although there are many other differences between us, we have interests and future challenges in common. We must work together against the climate emergency. We share

hopes for peace and justice. We place our faith in the will and knowledge of humankind.

Ladies and gentlemen: Please raise your glasses in honour of the President of India, Ram Nath Kovind, and Mrs Savita Kovind, and for the ongoing friendship between our countries.