

Namaskar, and a very good evening to all of you.

Director General Nandini Singla ji, Deputy Director Generals of the ICCR

Secretaries from the Ministry of External Affairs,

Members of the Diplomatic Corps,

Eminent artists and cultural leaders of India,

Representatives of educational institutions,

ICCR scholars,

Friends from the media,

Dear guests,

We are gathered here to mark the 75th anniversary of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR), and I am sure I speak for all of you, in saying how much today we enjoyed the performance of Stree Shakti, of the cultural group from Vietnam, and followed by the wonderful performance of foreign students of the ICCR. As is natural on such occasions, this is a time to remember the achievements and contributions of the ICCR, but it is also a time when our thoughts go to re-purposing it better for the future.

2. Now, 75 years is clearly a significant time for any institution to grow and develop. But it is an even longer time, when it comes to the changes in the environment in which such an institution functions. Our nation and our society have changed profoundly in this duration. Today, we are by any measure more confident, authentic and committed than before in terms of expressing our identity and promoting its understanding. Within the country, there is a much sharper awareness of our culture, heritage and traditions. Indeed, there is pride about so many of their facets that they translate into a wide range of activities and initiatives. We see that when it comes to promoting tourism and increasing our world heritage sites. It is visible in campaigns like One District, One Product, or for that matter, in the support that we now give to the Vishwakarma community. Traditions and inheritance that were long neglected have now been revived. More languages enjoy classical status and our habits and practices – whether we speak of yoga, Ayurveda or millets – they are receiving a new impetus and momentum. In essence, India is today more Bharat. And the ICCR recognizes this transformation, and I am confident will factor it into its future.

3. Now, during this very period, the world has changed as well. Economic and political rebalancing have today set the stage for cultural rebalancing. The natural diversity of the world is asserting itself, and you saw a small sample here. Voices and practices long suppressed are beginning to be heard,

not just heard again, but actually shaping the global discourse. As we move away from a particular version of globalization that served the interests of a few, these tendencies will accentuate further. In such a scenario, it is natural that a civilizational state like India would make its presence felt more strongly on the world stage. For ICCR, that means new horizons, new ambitions and a new agenda.

4. Now, friends, we live not just in an era of flux, but we actually have entered an existence that is more regionalized, and I would even say more localized. Consider the implications of what in diplomatic profession we often refer to as multi-polarity. It means more choices, it means greater interplay and less hegemonism. This would also suggest a healthier interaction of different experiences and traditions of the world. For many, it opens up windows to rediscovery. To others, it creates opportunities for fresh collaborations. The nations of the Global South are particular beneficiaries of these trends, if they could create mechanisms for deeper cultural exchanges. The ICCR can make a difference by addressing itself to this task.

5. When we look at the world, the diaspora plays an increasingly important role in shaping India's image. The compulsions of the global workplace are only going to increase the mobility of talent and skills. This will be over and above the historic migration that has taken place over the last few centuries. For India, the diaspora is both an invaluable connect and an enormous resource. Harnessing its energies more effectively should come high in the ICCR's priorities.

6. The ICCR's mandate has evolved in these last 75 years to a considerable extent. We have both the intention and today the resources to project India's culture more effectively abroad. But culture itself has acquired broader connotations, extending to different facets of our social fabric. Encouraging a dialogue about our democratic traditions is one such example. Developing a deeper understanding of the inherent unity that has enabled diversity to flower in this country is another. We seek to also promote a better appreciation of Indian Knowledge Systems. Education similarly occupies a larger segment of the ICCR's mind space. When it comes to taking India out to the world, ICCR has to prepare for a far more complex and ambitious exercise than in the past.

7. In fact, it is difficult today to talk about diplomacy without its cultural and soft power accompaniments. An example that comes to mind is our experience with the Quad. MEA through the ICCR has launched the Quad STEM fellowships for Indo-Pacific nations. I know this will evoke a strong response. Indeed, ICCR has been in the forefront of reaching out to the younger generation through its scholarships. I am confident that ICCR will build further on these experiences.

8. On its part, the world has already developed a considerable heritage of understanding about India. It has long been in ICCR's objective to promote Indology in all its dimensions. But this task has to be more contemporary, involving new generations with different requirements and utilizing modern tools. Indologists hold a unique value for the global propagation of our culture. That must be recognized, it must be respected and it must be more actively promoted.

9. The journey of development in the Amrit Kaal is based on the twin tracks of tradition and

technology. Far from being in contradiction, as many believed for years, they actually form a composite whole. Indeed, they are a fusion of our past and future which continuously determines the present. In its set of jurisdictions, ICCR could actively explore this synthesis. A good example is working on manuscripts using latest technologies.

10. Let me make a reference here to our G20 Presidency, because perhaps there are few events in recent times which brought out the importance of bringing the world to India more effectively than that Presidency. In that particular year, we saw the most effective influencers of the world of our times come, see and leave impressed. Two years later, we are still seeing the reverberations of that Presidency which I believe would continue further. Just as we wish the world to understand us better, it is important that Indians too develop a good feel for other societies and cultures. This is a domain in which the ICCR has long been active, whether it is in performing or fine arts, literature or cinema, or indeed, in exchange of artistes and students. Refreshing and increasing these practices for the times ahead is therefore very important.

11. The ICCR boasts of alumni across all geographies and cultures. Organizing them better using data bases and mobilizational tools is now more necessary than ever before. The alumni themselves have an interest in remaining connected, and of course, we do to an even greater degree.

12. It is also a common practice for organizations to leverage the capabilities of others with similar goals and interests. These could be forces in civil society, other governments or even like-minded groups and individuals. Getting better value for resources is always a driver of self-improvement. The ICCR should certainly keep that in mind.

13. The last decade has demonstrated how soft power endeavours can be run on a scale – in fact, on a global scale. We saw that when it came to popularizing yoga. Or in propagating Ayurveda and wellness practices. In fact, in encouraging the consumption of millets as well. Or in enhancing interest about India's history and traditions. These could serve to motivate ICCR as it enters the next phase of its growth.

14. So, friends, ladies and gentlemen, let me, on my own behalf and on yours, wish Team ICCR all the best in the times ahead. I am confident that they will continue to grow and they will continue to contribute to our quest for a Viksit Bharat.

Thank you very much.

New Delhi

April 09, 2025