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Hon'ble President of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee; Distinguished guests:

1. The famously Argumentative Indian has today become the cynical Indian - cynical about politicians, policy, public life - and even about the Constitutional order itself. The problem is not a begrudging citizenry, but the harsh reality that every government gets the cynicism it deserves.

But what do we do to *redress* this corrosive condition--one that threatens not just the credibility of our governance but the idea of India itself? As we collectively yearn for the great leaders who can wave away disillusion and re-enchanted our political imagination, it is easy to lose sight of a subtler truth: that **great democracies are built and sustained not just by great leaders, but by steady, painstaking work in a quieter tranche - a tranche where urgent social problems are researched with rigor, where the word 'debate' signifies something more than a barrage of pre-rehearsed TV soundbytes, where policy ideas are tested and refined on the basis of hard-won evidence, with an eye toward the greater common good.**

**It is in these quieter corridors of political thinking that a society begins to create the self-knowledge that it needs, expands its range of practical policy options, and begins to unravel its dilemmas.**

What usefully can we say of Maoist unrest and despair in large parts of our countryside, if we do not grasp the administrative abstentions and state failures in these regions?

How can we debate the utility of reservations as a social justice tool, when we have such patchy data on its effects?

What can we say about who indulges and who benefits from corruption, when we have investigated so little of its workings?

**Much of what we try as policy is based on little evidence. We need more than ever spaces where evidence and truth lead us to policy choices, not where perceived offence and fear incite calls to arrest unconventional ideas. Without such incubatory spaces for independent inquiry, our political ideas will remain as wishful, our political realities as arid, our responses to a concerned citizenry as hollow, as they are today.**

And make no mistake, our cynicism is not an Indian character flaw. It is a product of intellectual frustration: frustration at a world made opaque to citizens, where they cannot ever be sure what the policeman, the teacher, the doctor, the bureaucrat, the elected official will do -- because they cannot be sure to whom those authorities are truly responsible. **We have intellectually disenfranchised our fellow citizens, and a frank recognition of where we stand now is the first step toward re-inclusion.**

It could not be more right that India's respected newspaper of national record, published by the great house of Kasturi & Sons, has chosen this moment to create the Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy. It will support with full intellectual freedom investigations into our changing society and politics - and from its home in the south it will place its findings in the public sphere, for scrutiny and debate, and to improve our public policy choices and outcomes.

4. The work of the Hindu Centre must speak not only to government: but to academics and the media, to the corporate world and to activists, to the establishment and to the disaffected: and above all, to us as citizens.

For we are past the time when Government, in its arrogance, could credibly believe that it knows best. But we need also to move beyond the current modish contempt for government, to be found among many corporate leaders, as also the condescension of intellectuals. These circles of mutual disdain damage the prospects for effective policy.

**At a time when the Indian republic is in profound need of renewal, when we need to reinvigorate our institutions, remind ourselves of our founding principles -- when we face, that is, big and daunting tasks, we need also to rediscover the primacy of policy: the smaller, measurable steps by which a society moves towards high ideals. For it is only if citizens can sense that movement in their everyday lives and struggles that the ideals embodied in our Constitution will appear as worth sustaining.**

5. The idea of India was never, as some cynics have claimed, an ideology. At heart, it was an experimental idea, an experiment like no other in what a nation could be. Born in testing circumstances, it is an idea that will survive and strengthen through further testing. We need to treat it as such: a living, evolving idea - not backward looking, not defensive of old principles. **As we strengthen and deepen the spaces for independent policy thinking, we quietly but firmly strengthen the possibility that we can self-correct and become a fairer, less divided nation - so redeeming, not wholly or in full measure, but tangibly the promise of our Constitution.**