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**ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCY R. PREMADASA  
PRESIDENT AT THE INAUGURATION OF 51st  
INTERNATIONAL SKAL CONGRESS AT THE BMICH IN  
COLOMBO ON MONDAY 29TH OCTOBER, 1990**

It is with pleasure that I associate myself with you at this inauguration of the 51st Skal Congress. This is indeed a historic event. This is your 51st Congress. It is also a unique event for us in Sri Lanka. As you know this is the first time Sri Lanka has been selected to be the venue of your Annual Congress. It is true that your Congresses have been moving from one geographical area to another. I am told that this is the fourth time that your Congress is being held in Asia.

We all know that the Skal movement is 56 years old now. It was founded in Paris in 1934. In the Swedish language 'SKAL' means 'Cheers'. In fact, 'SKAL' is made up of the initials of four Swedish words, "Happiness, Good Health, Friendship and Long Life". True to its meaning, the Skal movement is dedicated to the promotion of international tourism and friendship between members of the staff of the Tourist Industry. It is also dedicated to the noble objective of fostering goodwill and promoting understanding between the peoples of the world. Today the Skal movement has spread its branches to all corners of the world. We are aware that there are 500 clubs in 76



countries. These are all bound together by brotherhood, friendship and understanding. They cut across all barriers of race, religion, culture and nationality.

The members of your club hold responsible positions in all segments of the tourist industry. The members of your club are people who matter in the airlines, hotels, travel agencies, tour operations and other connected trades. The Colombo Skala Club decided to make a bid in Vienna two years ago to hold the Skala Congress in Colombo this year. In this effort my Government gave its blessings and every encouragement.

The reason for our supporting this bid is obvious. You are no doubt aware, that over the last seven years or so our country has gone through a period of civil strife in one form or another. Through the International media, you would have learned of the efforts we are making to solve these problems. We are trying to solve them through dialogue and not by the use of force. Unfortunately, whilst negotiations were going on, certain segments resorted to violence. It is the primary responsibility of any Government to maintain law and order. This responsibility is even greater in a democratically elected system. The democratic rights and traditions of the people must be safeguarded. Isn't it the government's duty to suppress terrorism when it is a threat to the unity, sovereignty and the territorial integrity of a country ?

**However, in spite of these problems the Government has taken meaningful steps to promote tourism. Every effort is being made to make Sri Lanka an attractive and memorable destination for tourists. This year, upto September, some 200,000 tourists have come to our country. This is an increase of 78% in tourist arrivals over the same period last year.**



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I am told that there are over 700 Delegates from 40 countries participating in these deliberations. You have come here in spite of the adverse publicity. You have made the correct decision, because it is said that "Seeing is Believing". During your stay here you will have the opportunity to see for yourselves. You will also be able to make your own independent judgement about the situation in Sri Lanka.

I find that the theme of your Congress this year is "Tourism and Environment". I must congratulate you for selecting this theme. It is so very appropriate in the context of the expansion of the tourist industry. It is extremely timely because environmental damage and destruction can have serious adverse impacts on the tourist industry.

The Green Movement currently taking place in the world has thrown into sharp focus the impact of international tourism on the environment. My Government is a keen promoter of tourism while being a firm advocate of environmental protection.

Since the link between Tourism and Environment is so intimate, the challenge before us is to devise a methodology of harmonising these two areas. It is important that we study the positive and negative effects of tourism on the environment. If we do so we can promote tourism development while at the same time minimizing damage to the natural environment.

**As the inheritors of a culture and civilization fashioned by Buddhist values and an Irrigation technology, we in Sri Lanka have a special responsibility towards protecting the natural environment. The traditional village based culture of Sri Lanka revolved around the twin symbols of**



**the Wewa and Dagoba – the Reservoir and the Temple. As you know conservation of natural resources and living in harmony with the environment are a part and parcel of the Buddhist way of life.**

With the impact of over four centuries of colonial rule, we lost some of these values. We forgot the importance of the ecological balance. In our quest for modernization and development, we turned our back on the natural environment. We were compelled to pay the price in terms of drought, landslides, floods, industrial pollution and coastal erosion.

In Sri Lanka a separate Ministry of Tourism was established over 25 years ago. This was done to ensure the planned development of the industry. Another important objective was to ensure that the growth of the industry did not cause adverse impacts on the environment. Even with all these safeguards, tourism has had an adverse impact on the environment in Sri Lanka in certain areas.

**We have to learn our lessons from other countries. In the Mediterranean nearly one-third of the coast-line has been polluted as a result of the influx of tourists. In the national parks of Africa, there is disruption to wild-life. In many countries tourism has had an adverse impact on nature and wild-life. The illegal sale of sea-shells, turtle souvenirs and ivory are cases in point. Killing of elephants for ivory is making the elephant, which is a majestic animal, extinct in certain countries.**

International travel and tourism is nothing new. In ancient times Sri Lankans travelled thousands of miles on pilgrimage to places of Buddhist Worship in North India. Buddhist pilgrims from China, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand



and Burma have regularly visited the great Buddhist Shrines in Sri Lanka. In the olden days, a journey from one place to another on a small scale, posed no problems to the environment. Today the size and magnitude of tourist movements are reaching unmanageable proportions.

Two or three decades ago tourists from the developed countries travelled to the tropical countries in search of the sun, sand and the sea. Today many tourists go in search of adventure, challenge and exploration. In fact more and more people travel in search of the history and values of life in countries such as Sri Lanka. Some of our ancient Buddhist Monuments and Temples date back to over 2000 years. The closely knit society of the village and the simple pleasures of the rural life in Sri Lanka have fascinated many foreign visitors.

While on this subject may I ask whether we are offering the tourists who come to Sri Lanka the marvels of our heritage, culture and civilisation? I am afraid we are still not! The tourists come here and spend their time within the four walls of fully air-conditioned luxury hotels. They hardly come into contact with the local people, their traditions, their customs, their food and their way of living. **There is such a lot that we can offer to tourists by way of unpolluted air, green countryside, delicious fruits, nutritious vegetables, herbal medicine and what not. These are the good things that we must make available to our visitors. They will make the tourists healthy and strong and give them long life. Sometimes when we analyse the food we consume, one wonders whether such food items will make us live or die.**

What is now happening is that we are creating an artificial environment for the tourist which is very similar to



the living conditions in their own countries – crowded rooms, polluted air, fatty foods, synthetic medicines and the like. I think the travel and tourist trade should change their plans and strategies. **They must offer the tourist the simple, the beautiful and the natural ways of living in Sri Lanka. If you do so more and more tourists will come to Sri Lanka – just for something different and unique.**

The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) claims that tourism has seen a staggering growth of 1,600% over the last decade. By the turn of the century, tourism will account for 12% of the world's GNP and 5% of the world's export trade. There is the possibility that ill-planned tourism development can inhibit the living conditions and traditions of people who live in resort areas. Contact between the life-styles of tourists and that of the local population can sometimes give rise to delicate situations and social tensions. On the other hand, tourism can have a healthy and positive impact on these very same cultures and life-styles.

**If tourism and travel are well planned, especially in relation to the economic, social and natural environment, the return on investment would greatly increase. It will improve the social and economic conditions of the local population. It will also contribute to a harmonious and aesthetically sound development of resort areas.**

In this context, tourism development planning should not be sectoral, but inter-disciplinary. Hoteliers, tour operators and entertainment managers must get together with architects, ecologists, archaeologists and similar interest groups to come up with solutions to the complex problems of evolving an environmentally sound tourism structure.



We must be conscious of the oneness of all things in our approach to harmonizing tourism, development with nature conservation. If the quality of life of our people is to improve, we must achieve economic growth. The wealth that is achieved in this manner must be distributed justly. It is also necessary to achieve such wealth without damage to the environment. That is the cost of environmental policy without which tourism development becomes meaningless in the long term. I hope your Congress will come up with answers to this challenge.

I wish your deliberations all success.

I thank you.

Dr. J. S. D. S.



