

*Honourable Members of the Legislative Assembly,*

It gives me great pleasure to address the first session of the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly for the year 2003. I extend my greetings to all of you for the New Year. I have every confidence that during the year 2003, Tamil Nadu will march towards realizing its tryst with destiny, which envisions opportunities for all, improved quality of life, bountiful and all round prosperity.

2. The year that has just gone by saw many tumultuous events in the country. India was almost pushed into war with Pakistan in 2002 because of Pakistan's continued support to terrorism, reaching not only Mumbai and Hyderabad but also causing echoes in Coimbatore. The spectre of terrorist violence is very real and cuts across States. A co-ordinated approach by State Governments and eternal vigilance by all are necessary to fight this menace. This Government has been steadfastly committed to providing State relief and support to the families of security personnel from

Tamil Nadu, who have laid down their lives safeguarding the country from enemy action and insurgencies. We salute all those who have sacrificed their lives for this noble cause.

3. This Government is determined not to allow the sinister shadow of terrorism and extremism to touch the lives of people in Tamil Nadu. This Government extended its full support to the Union Government in the enactment of POTA through a joint session of Parliament. The ban on LTTE has been extended further. The TNRT and TNLA were banned under the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1908, by this Government and subsequently under the POTA, 2002, by the Government of India. This Government will continue to extend its full support to the Government of India in all measures taken to protect the sovereignty and integrity of the nation.

4. I am glad to state that law and order was effectively maintained in Tamil Nadu during 2002. Religious festivals including those of the minorities were held in a peaceful manner. The very fact that the

Kandadevi Car festival was successfully conducted in Sivagangai district after many years stands testimony to the able handling of the situation by the Government. Dharmapuri and Vellore districts used to be the hotbed of naxalism during the 1970s and 1980s. Thanks to the resolute and tough action by this Government during its previous tenure in office between 1991-1996, peace returned to this backward area of the State. The problem resurfaced again in 1999 due to a let up in the vigil by the Government of the day. This Government has recently smashed a group of Naxalites when they met in a conclave in Dharmapuri district before they could cause any damage. While pre-emptive vigil will be maintained, a comprehensive development plan for Dharmapuri district is being drawn up to tackle the socio-economic causes, which allow these groups to foment trouble. The Chief Minister Selvi J Jayalalithaa has already indicated this Government's resolve to bring a new legislation to stamp out the usurious practices widely prevalent in rural areas. This will go a long way towards dousing social tension. Attempts by misguided religious fanatics to provoke communal passions in

Coimbatore were also thwarted by prompt preventive action. This Government once again resolves to come down heavily on extremism, secessionism and those indulging in unlawful activities.

5. Modernization of the Police Force is an essential pre-requisite for effective maintenance of law and order. This Government is implementing a programme for modernization of the Police Force at a cost of Rs.272 crores over two years. In a unique and unprecedented initiative, the Chief Minister Selvi J Jayalalithaa personally held five detailed sessions spread over five days with officers and ranks of the Tamil Nadu Police to resolve their specific grievances. As I am familiar with the complexities of keeping up the morale of the Police Force, I would like to compliment the Hon'ble Chief Minister for this morale building exercise, never before undertaken by any Chief Minister in the country. The Government plans to raise an All-Women Police Battalion, which would be the first of its kind in any State. An All-Women Commando Company for countering terrorism is being raised.

Special attention is being given to filling up the backlog of vacancies, strengthening the All Women Police Stations and providing modern arms, vehicles and equipment so that the Tamil Nadu Police becomes the most well equipped and trained law enforcement agency in the country.

6. This Government condemns the brutal murder of Thiru H. Nagappa, former Minister of the Government of Karnataka, by the forest brigand, Veerappan. I wish to convey the heartfelt condolences of the Government and people of Tamil Nadu to the bereaved family. Swift and sustained action by the Special Task Force (STF) of both the States was strongly advocated by our Hon'ble Chief Minister to capture Veerappan. But in the wake of Thiru Nagappa's kidnapping, the Government of Karnataka suspended all search operations indefinitely. The Tamil Nadu STF was also formally requested by Karnataka to cease all operations and withdraw from Karnataka forest territory. All these were of no avail, as is seen from the killing of Thiru Nagappa. There has to be an early end to the

brutalities of the forest brigand. The operations of the Tamil Nadu STF would be further intensified in close co-ordination with the Karnataka STF. The Government of India has been requested to render all necessary assistance. A relentless pursuit of the dreaded brigand has been launched to finally put a stop to his depredations.

7. The untiring efforts of the Hon'ble Chief Minister to secure Cauvery water for the farmers of Tamil Nadu were rewarded when the Hon'ble Supreme Court ordered Karnataka to release 1.25 TMC ft. of water per day to Tamil Nadu. Unfortunately, neither this order nor the subsequent directive of the Cauvery River Authority to release 9000 cusecs have been obeyed by Karnataka. Karnataka's continued defiance questions the essence and efficacy of constitutionally sanctioned federal dispute settlement mechanisms. Consequently, a deficit of 60.22 TMC ft. emerged, as at the end of December 2002, even as per the distress sharing formula. This was brought to the notice of the Hon'ble Prime Minister by the Hon'ble

Chief Minister on 13th January, 2003. Now Karnataka is not even willing to release 18.80 TMC ft. of water, being the deficit from 4th September 2002, as per the orders of the Hon'ble Supreme Court. As a consequence, unfolding before our very eyes is the dark tragedy of standing paddy crops in lakhs of acres in the Cauvery delta area withering away. Thanks to the persistent efforts of our Hon'ble Chief Minister, Karnataka is now releasing some water. Unfortunately, this meagre quantity is not enough for even one wetting of the standing Samba crop in the Cauvery delta area. We hope good sense will prevail and a further substantial quantity of water will be released to enable one more wetting of the standing crops.

8. To alleviate the distress caused by the Cauvery water dispute, this Government mounted a massive relief operation to mitigate the effects of the unprecedented drought in the Cauvery delta region. The Hon'ble Chief Minister visited Thanjavur in June 2002 and sanctioned relief measures for the three delta districts at a cost of Rs. 164.18 crores. This relief

programme was well received. Deepavali Gift Hampers were distributed to about 10 lakh landless agricultural labourers in the delta districts at a cost of Rs. 21 crores. It is now clear that barely 40 percent of the standing Samba crops can be saved. This is an enormous tragedy. The Union Government has to treat this as an unprecedented national calamity, the gravity of which has been explained to the Hon'ble Prime Minister. The Hon'ble Chief Minister has made out a strong case for a relief package to provide Rs.5000 per acre amounting to Rs.400 crores as compensation to farmers who have lost their crop. The Hon'ble Chief Minister has also sought a debt relief package involving waiver of the principal amount for the affected farmers in the delta region and 2 lakh tonnes of rice for the mid-day meal programme for farmers, agricultural labourers and their families. It is hoped that the Union Government will provide the relief requested urgently.

9. Tamil Nadu is a water-starved State which has to battle hard to obtain even its existing supplies which have been available over centuries. The

move by the Government of Kerala to construct a weir and divert Bhavani waters comes as a further blow. The Hon'ble Chief Minister has taken up this issue with the Chief Minister of Kerala requesting Kerala to desist from this construction. This Government has also moved the Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal on this issue requesting a stay on the construction of the weir.

10. Right from the days of Puratchi Thalaivar MGR, this Government has been demanding the adoption of a national outlook in the management and equitable sharing of water resources through nationalization of all major rivers. The Chief Minister Selvi J Jayalalithaa made an impassioned plea for the immediate implementation of the Ganga-Cauvery link, while speaking in the Rajya Sabha way back in 1984. This Government welcomes the constitution of the Task Force on Interlinking of Rivers by the Government of India. At the Fiftieth National Development Council Meeting in New Delhi in December 2002, the Chief Minister urged the Hon'ble Prime Minister to complete the series of river links between Mahanadhi and Cauvery

during the Tenth Plan Period itself. The Government of India has also been requested by the Chief Minister to complete similar river links in the Southern peninsula, such as linking the west flowing Pamba Achankoil to Vaippar within the Tenth Plan period.

11. Tamil Nadu is experiencing one of the worst droughts in its history. The failure of the South West monsoon has been compounded by the intransigence of Karnataka in not releasing water, rendering the Cauvery delta region arid. The Government of India approved certain items of drought relief expenditure based on the facts of the drought situation presented by this Government. The expenditure on drought relief incurred so far in the current year is Rs.142.80 crores. 50000 MTs of rice have been distributed under the Food for Work programme and the works are going on in full swing. The earlier assessment was undertaken in the background of the failure of the South West monsoon. The North East monsoon which began very well has also let us down, further aggravating the situation. Based on the latest assessment of the

situation, this Government has decided to declare all the 28 districts except Chennai as drought affected. This will enable comprehensive relief works to be taken up in all the 28 districts. We shall also be approaching the Government of India for a further relief package. We shall obtain further allotments of rice and ensure that enough work is available in rural areas throughout the summer.

12. The failure of the North East monsoon is also posing a serious threat to the supply of drinking water to Chennai. The Government has moved fast to conserve the existing supplies. During her recent visit to Hyderabad, the Hon'ble Chief Minister met the Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister and requested the early release of Krishna water to Chennai. The storage position in the Andhra Pradesh reservoirs is also extremely poor due to the failure of the monsoon. The Hon'ble Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh has promised an early release of water from Kandaleru reservoir. Until then, we have to conserve and use the available water judiciously. This Government is also working on medium term solutions,

such as the New Veeranam Project, so that such acute water shortages can be prevented in future.

13. Malnutrition-free and hunger-free Tamil Nadu cannot be a mere slogan. It is at such a time of unprecedented drought and water shortage that deprivation and want come to the fore. I must compliment the Chief Minister Selvi J Jayalithaa for boldly launching the free mid-day meal scheme for small and marginal farmers, landless agricultural labourers and their families in distress. This has given real meaning and content to the concept of a hunger-free Tamil Nadu. No one will be allowed to face the spectre of starvation. There cannot be a better example of a caring State committed to the welfare of its people.

14. Progressive States like Tamil Nadu have been severely penalized by successive Finance Commissions in pursuit of a misplaced sense of redistributive justice ending up in rewarding non-performance, fiscal indiscipline and inefficiency of laggard States, to the detriment of well-performing States. Serious issues like mounting high cost debt

burden of the States have been completely ignored. This has landed even the well performing States in a deep fiscal abyss. Never before have the better performing States found themselves in such a predicament. The implementation of the recommendations of the Eleventh Finance Commission have left Tamil Nadu poorer by Rs. 2946 crores, for the period 2000-2005. Together with the fiscal ruin of the past and the lack of any scheme for debt relief, Tamil Nadu has had to battle hard to stay afloat. We welcome the constitution of the Twelfth Finance Commission headed by the seasoned economist, Dr. C. Rangarajan, in the hope that the Twelfth Finance Commission will break away from the beaten track, offering a new deal for States which have done well to keep their house in order.

15. The Chief Minister Selvi J Jayalalithaa has, in her speech before the National Development Council, brought to notice the serious pitfalls in accepting some of the recommendations of the Task Force on Direct Taxes. The Tenth Plan has been formulated with the underlying assumption of a higher

savings rate leading to higher investment. The Task Force has recommended withdrawal of all incentives for small savings. This recommendation would make the Tenth Plan a non-starter. The Task Force has also recommended substantial reduction in the incentives for investment in housing. As everyone knows, the housing sector has a multiplier effect on the economy, and it should be encouraged. This Government urges the Government of India to retain the incentives for small savings and the housing sector to promote economic growth.

16. When this Government assumed office in May 2001, it was confronted by a fiscal crisis of unprecedented proportions. The Hon'ble Chief Minister had requested the Hon'ble Prime Minister for assistance of Rs.3000 crores in the form of a one time grant. This has not been forthcoming. Simultaneously, external agencies such as the World Bank have held back even project-based loans, as the State had not undertaken fiscal reforms prior to 2001. Fiscal reforms have thus become inevitable. The popular misconception is that

fiscal crises are nothing new. Unfortunately, the fiscal crisis confronting the State was of a nature not known before. With an extraordinary debt burden and current revenues totally inadequate to pay current expenditure, Tamil Nadu was in grave danger of abandoning the development path altogether and defaulting on its obligations.

17. The Hon'ble Chief Minister has taken up a bold agenda of fiscal reforms in order to restore the financial health and credibility of the State. These fiscal reforms are necessary to ensure that the State does not collapse. It is a bitter medicine which has to be swallowed, if we are to stay healthy. Given the extent and gravity of the fiscal malaise, the fiscal reforms programme has to necessarily be a medium term programme, involving several measures in different sectors. I am glad that the Hon'ble Chief Minister has been leading the effort to restore the fiscal health of the State. More measures are called for to restore complete fiscal health. This also brings to the fore the question of fiscal responsibility. There has to be a broad consensus

on what constitutes sound fiscal health at the State level and this can perhaps be set out as guiding principles in a Fiscal Responsibility Act. We can work towards this goal so that such problematic situations affecting the health of the State are not repeated again.

18. Given the perilous position of the public finances of the State, the possibility of even formulating a Five Year Plan seemed like a distant dream. The focussed attention by the Hon'ble Chief Minister on fiscal reforms has enabled the State Government to put through and obtain the approval of the Union Planning Commission for an ambitious Tenth Plan (2002-2007) outlay of Rs. 40,000 crores. I compliment the Chief Minister Selvi J Jayalithaa for putting together a sound and credible development agenda for the State. It is no mean achievement given the extent of the fiscal problems confronting the State.

19. The Hon'ble Chief Minister has dared to dream big for the people of Tamil Nadu. The Government has set for itself a target of achieving 8 percent growth rate of GSDP in the Tenth Five Year

Plan. The Hon'ble Chief Minister has set out a vision of doubling the per capita income of the State by 2010, two years before the national target. This would be achieved by adopting a four-pronged approach consisting of innovative development initiatives, good governance, maintenance of law and order and fiscal reforms. The State's Tenth Five Year Plan is based on the Hon'ble Chief Minister's 15-point programme and covers the entire gamut of socio-economic development of Tamil Nadu. The launching of the Tenth Plan, with the approval of the National Development Council in December 2002, is a significant landmark.

20. Improvement in the performance of the primary sector, particularly agriculture, holds the key to achieving the ambitious Tenth Plan targets. The Government has evolved a well designed strategy for stepping up growth and enhancement of new opportunities in the primary sector. A programme for Comprehensive Wasteland Development based on a watershed approach has been launched. This consists of three components. The first component relates to

bringing fallow lands, both current and permanent, owned by individual farmers, under productive economic activity through an agri-clinical approach in all villages. The second component consists of getting corporate houses to undertake the development of wastelands along with an associated processing industry. A beginning has been made in 7 districts. The third intervention focuses on promoting agro-based and food processing industries with a minimum investment of Rs. 1 crore in each of the 385 blocks of the State under the New Anna Marumalarchi Thittam. A total of 258 proposals covering 182 blocks with a project cost of Rs. 227.41 crores are under process. This strategy of comprehensive wasteland development will restore the growth momentum in the primary sector. It will also result in value creating activities in rural areas which will be most useful in the State's poverty alleviation programme.

21. Recurrent water shortages, plateauing of production and productivity and stagnation of returns in the primary sector have put the rural economy under

severe stress. The focus has to be placed on efficient management of our scarce water resources. The Hon'ble Chief Minister has rightly placed the maximum emphasis on rainwater harvesting in both urban and rural areas. A massive programme of desilting of small tanks with an ayacut of less than 100 acres each, village ponds and water conveyance systems, has been launched. This will be implemented on a war footing this summer as part of the Food for Work programme. Likewise, a massive programme of desilting and upgrading PWD tanks with an ayacut of more than 100 acres, will also be launched. This Government has taken up with the World Bank, the launching of the Water Resources Consolidation Project-II to be implemented at a cost of Rs.2900 crores and pending its clearance, to allow the first project to continue.

22. The fact that the State is chronically water deficient is a reality and cultivation of water intensive crops by farmers would no longer be sustainable. A determined effort towards breaking the traditional mindset and weaning away farmers from water intensive

cultivation to cultivation of high value, less water demanding cash crops, horticulture development and medicinal plants is underway. The farming community would be encouraged to adopt the latest techniques in integrated nutrient and pest management, water-use efficiency and cost-effective farming technology. In dryland agricultural zones, an all-out co-ordinated effort for integrated farm management together with goat-rearing will be encouraged. The intention is to protect the farmer from over-exploitation of water and insulate him from the vagaries of the monsoon by providing supplementary household income.

23. Comprehensive rural infrastructure development is the *sine qua non* for improving the performance of the primary sector and generation of new opportunities. A rural roads development plan to provide complete all-weather connectivity is being formulated and will be implemented from 2003-2004. In order to provide housing for the rural poor, 43580 houses at a total cost of Rs. 141.46 crores have been taken up for construction this year, besides improving 19142 kutcha

houses at a cost of Rs. 19.14 crores. This programme will continue in 2003. Nearly 10000 houses for beedi workers would be constructed at a total cost of Rs.—40 crores during the next five years. The Government will complete the construction of the remaining 6309 Integrated Sanitary Complexes for women in 2003. Given the enthusiastic response to this scheme, construction of Integrated Sanitary Complexes for men would also be taken up on a pilot basis in Kanyakumari district.

24. The Hon'ble Chief Minister has articulated the vision of an export-led growth strategy for the secondary sector in Tamil Nadu. This Government has taken up the second generation of reforms to secure sustained growth in the manufacturing sector. This includes simplification of procedures, elimination of transaction costs, deregulation, reduction of transaction time at ports and customs, interest rate reductions, labour reforms, proper energy pricing etc. I am happy to inform you that the Government is contemplating the enactment of a legislation to facilitate public-private

partnership in development of infrastructure in the State. An innovative Special Economic Zone Policy of this Government is on the anvil that would cover new areas such as Ennore, Chennai and Tuticorin, for giving a special impetus to export oriented industrial units. Necessary clearances for the establishment of Apparel Parks in Chennai and Tiruppur have been obtained. These will give a boost to the textile industry in the State.

25. As the national economy opens up, the small-scale industries in Tamil Nadu face a crucial challenge of developing their capacity to compete with other domestic and international competitors. The Hon'ble Chief Minister has requested the Union Government to evolve a new policy package for technology upgradation and quality improvement for the small-scale sector. This Government has already announced its policy of extending preferential treatment to small-scale industries in Government procurements. We would strive towards strengthening the comparative advantage of the small-scale industries to enable them to

take their rightful place in the liberalized economic environment.

26. With a view to mitigating the sufferings of small tea growers in The Nilgiris district, the Government introduced a scheme for sale of “Ooty Tea” through the public distribution system. I am glad to inform this august House that this scheme has been extremely well received by small tea growers and consumers alike. The total sale of “Ooty tea” has crossed 4075 MT fetching Rs. 30.56 crores. A new auction centre called ‘Teaserve’ in Coonor will soon become operational and this will ensure transparency and better returns to the small tea growers. This Government will urge the Government of India to operationalise the Price Stabilization Scheme for tea growers to give them a fair price. A two-pronged strategy for improving productivity and yield in existing tea gardens and providing other suitable inter-crops, as a value adding proposition, will be followed.

27. The handloom sector in Tamil Nadu faced a crisis of an unprecedented nature brought about by a

glut of unsold goods and serious financial problems in handloom co-operatives. The Hon'ble Chief Minister is to be complimented for completely redesigning the scheme of distribution of free sarees and dhotis by making it a market-based scheme. This has received enthusiastic response from people within and outside the State. The Government has so far sanctioned Rs. 79.84 crores towards procurement and sale of sarees and dhotis under the new scheme. Pending interest subsidy arrears of Rs. 27.50 crores due to the handloom weavers since December, 1998, have been cleared. This has improved the health of the handloom co-operatives. Old stocks have been disposed off and inventory levels have come down. Modernization with reference to market opportunities will now be pursued vigorously.

28. The key employment goals of this Government can be achieved by developing the services sector. We expect Information Technology to be a key driver for accelerated growth. The State is emerging as a major hub for software and hardware development and is poised to be the IT gateway to South East Asia. The

IT Park at Siruseri will be expanded to become a Knowledge Industry Township. A world class highway to connect the Gandhi Mandapam Road in Chennai to the Siruseri IT Park and on to the East Coast Road will be built shortly. This will enable the entire belt up to the proposed new Administrative City to become a massive IT hub. A new IT policy has been formulated placing the highest emphasis on Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES) and Business-Process Outsourcing (BPO) activities. The very fact that the World Bank, Standard Chartered Bank and ABN-AMRO Bank have chosen to locate their world operations here indicates that Chennai is becoming a destination of choice. We will build on these strengths.

29. Adequate and quality infrastructure comprising world class roads, water supply, energy, housing, urban services and ports are the key to attracting big ticket industrial investments in the State. There will be a special focus on building world class infrastructure in the Tenth Plan period. The Tamil Nadu Road Sector Project, to be implemented with assistance

from the World Bank at an estimated cost of Rs.1900 crores, is in the final stages of clearance. This will be implemented shortly. A Road Development Fund will be established to enable public-private partnerships in development of world class roads. To set right the backlog in relaying roads in the period up to 2001, the Hon'ble Chief Minister has announced a programme of relaying 2500 kms of roads before March 2003 at a cost of Rs.90 crores, and a further 5000 kms of roads at a cost of Rs.180 crores in 2003-2004. We shall urge the Government of India to take up the implementation of the Sethusamudram project urgently.

30. The failure of the monsoons has adversely affected the storage levels in reservoirs supplying water to the hydel power stations. Despite this, energy supply to all categories of consumers has been maintained. The quality of power supply has also improved significantly. During the Tenth Plan Period, the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (TNEB) would be implementing a Plan outlay of Rs.8000 crores for system improvements and upgrading the quality of power supply. In order to meet the

growing energy demand, new generating capacities are being created in the private sector. A new 250-MW power plant in the private sector has been commissioned in December, 2002. Another 100-MW gas-based TNEB power plant is likely to be commissioned by February, 2003.

31. Tourism promotion in Tamil Nadu will receive special attention this year. We view tourism as a key driver of the services sector. Our approach towards tourism development will focus on creation of proper infrastructure in the main circuits, upgradation of facilities through public-private participation and sustained publicity campaigns. The recent decision to reduce the luxury tax on hotels and lodges and entertainment tax on amusement and theme parks is calculated to encourage tourism, both foreign and domestic, in the State.

32. I am glad that the Hon'ble Chief Minister has taken up the all round development of the Chennai Metropolitan area. The signing of the Memorandum of Understanding for development of the Administrative

City and the Marina Urban Renewal Project is an important landmark. I am also glad to know that the Hon'ble Chief Minister has ordered the preparation of the Chennai Infrastructure Development Plan which will have one, three and ten-year time frames. With its launch this year, this Plan will restore to Chennai, its position as the premier city of the South. I am glad to inform the House that all the problems and inadequacies which surfaced during the monsoon last year will be comprehensively attended to as part of this Plan.

33. This Government is working out a comprehensive strategy for addressing environmental concerns together with developmental imperatives. Sustainable development has to be the watchword. The Hon'ble Chief Minister's initiatives with regard to rainwater harvesting have become a social movement in urban areas. This Government will also encourage the establishment of reverse osmosis plants in all public buildings with high water consumption to enable recycling. A Bill with simple features designed to prevent throwaway plastic bags and other articles from

fouling our urban and rural landscape and posing a health hazard, will be carried through. I appeal to the people to join the movement initiated by the Government for conserving the scarce water resources and improving the environment of this State.

34. An effective social safety net is crucial to protect people from the rigours of reforms and the structural adjustment process. The social safety net of this State Government covers all facets of human life, including access to quality health and education, nutritional support and pension schemes to protect the disadvantaged, disabled, aged and the elderly, in meeting the challenges of life with dignity. I wish to announce the unwavering commitment of this Government to strengthening the social security net, notwithstanding the financial constraints that confront us.

35. The State Government has been concerned over the plateauing of vital health indicators such as the Birth Rate, Infant Mortality Rate and Maternal Mortality Rate prior to 2001. This trend has to be corrected and a rapid improvement ensured. The

Health Systems Development Project posed to the World Bank at a cost of Rs. 650 crores has been taken up for detailed examination and this is likely to be implemented in the coming year. The existing network of health subcentres will be upgraded with quality infrastructure. Proper training will be imparted to Village Health Nurses so that effective service can be rendered in rural areas. The programme for the upgradation of primary health centres is being implemented in phases and 58 such centres have been taken up in this year. The construction work on the new medical colleges at Theni, Vellore and Kanyakumari has begun. An innovative tele-medicine project has been launched and this will enable patients at faraway centres to access quality medical advice and treatment.

36. The appointment of women, at the same time, to a number of key posts like that of the Chief Secretary, Chairperson- State Public Service Commission, Chairperson-Wakf Board and Chairperson-Minority Welfare Commission among others, is unprecedented and is eloquent testimony to this

Government's commitment to the cause of gender equity and empowerment of women. Women have also been appointed as executive officers in temples. The first ever All-Women commando unit in the country has been created in this State. This Government would continue to urge the Government of India for the early passage of the Bill pending in the Parliament providing for 33 percent reservation for women in Parliament and State Legislatures.

37. In Tamil Nadu, the empowerment of women is not just restricted to the highest levels in Government. The effective functioning and credit worthiness of 1.15 lakh Women Self-Help Groups, comprising about 20 lakh women, exemplify the resounding success of our women development initiatives. The Entrepreneurship Development Programme for women, the first ever Women's Biotechnology Park near Chennai and the proposed Eco-Enterprises Park in Dindigul district, will open up new opportunities for women entrepreneurs. Measures such as the opening of Women Helplines, mobile

counselling vans and Mahila Courts will go a long way in enhancing social and legal security among women. It can well be said that in Tamil Nadu, women's empowerment has indeed become a reality.

38. Tamil Nadu is poised to march forward from merely ensuring survival of children to their robust growth and healthy mental and physical development. Despite compelling fiscal constraints, the Hon'ble Chief Minister has announced and implemented an increase in the provision for vegetables, condiments etc. from 23 paise to 35 paise per beneficiary at an additional cost of Rs.20.98 crores per year. In a situation wherein cuts even on the current outlays on social sectors are inevitable, this Government has shown rare courage in stepping up the provision to provide enriched food. The Government is taking all steps necessary to engender social conscience against the pernicious practice of female infanticide. The unique Cradle Baby Scheme and the Girl Child Protection Scheme have been hailed as landmark governmental interventions in providing the girl child with a chance for a good life.

39. The Hon'ble Chief Minister deserves the credit for enacting the Compulsory Elementary Education Act 1994 (Tamil Nadu Act 33 of 1995) to realize the goal of Universalization of Elementary Education. Today, with Tamil Nadu moving towards stabilization in population growth, the emphasis has shifted from opening new schools to ensuring 100 percent enrollment and retention of children. The school noon meal programme ensures better retention. The total investment on nutrition for pre-school children and those of school going age in the current year is estimated at Rs.645.76 crores. The Hon'ble Chief Minister has requested the Hon'ble Prime Minister to take up the entire noon meal programme as a national programme and provide 100 percent assistance as a grant. This Government has embarked on a major programme for improving access to quality education in the State under the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan.

40. This Government has fulfilled its promise of providing free education to girls belonging to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes up to post-

graduate level. The decision to convert educational loan scholarship as a grant from 2002-03 for students belonging to the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes has been widely welcomed. It is a matter of great satisfaction that the scheme for providing free bicycles to girls belonging to the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes studying in classes XI and XII, has been extremely well received. In order to improve their access to quality education, this Government has embarked on a massive programme for construction of hostels for SC, ST, BC and MBC students and this would be continued in 2003.

41. This Government has launched a scheme for entrepreneurship development of women belonging to the Backward Classes, Most Backward Classes and Denotified Communities. Nearly 5000 beneficiaries belonging to these communities are being extended financial assistance of Rs.10,000 each, at a total cost of Rs.5 crores. Micro-credit of Rs.20 crores is also being made available to 1 lakh women from these communities for starting petty trades. Assistance is also being provided for promoting entrepreneurship among

1000 youth belonging to minority communities at a cost of Rs.2.50 crores.

42. This Government firmly believes that good governance practices can go a long way in improving the efficiency and reach of developmental programmes. The unlimited possibilities of information technology would be harnessed to provide clean, transparent and participatory governance. Touch Screen Kiosks would be provided in all Taluk offices in 2003. This Government has set itself against corruption and will not spare delinquent officials. A new Right to Information Bill is under consideration so as to institutionalize open and participatory administration.

43. Promotion of Tamil language, art and culture would receive due attention of the Government. The Hon'ble Chief Minister solemnized the wedding of 1008 poor couples and gave them basic household articles. The attempts by the Archaeological Survey of India to take over the centuries-old Arulmigu Arunachaleswara temple in Tiruvannamalai district was prevented by the timely intervention of the State

Government. The “Annadhanam Scheme”, launched by the Hon’ble Chief Minister, aimed at providing free mid-day meals to devotees in temples, has been widely appreciated by the people. This scheme is presently being implemented in 144 temples. This Government plans to extend the Annadhanam scheme in phases to cover more temples.

44. The Government deserves to be complimented for the proper and sagacious handling of the strike by Government employees and teachers in October 2002. I appeal to all employees to extend full support to the Government in dealing with the extreme fiscal distress that the State has to contend with.

45. This Government has been facing a series of problems and crises of monumental proportions ever since it assumed office in May, 2001. The enormity of the fiscal problems, the devastating impact on account of failure of two consecutive monsoons, together with the denial of our legitimate share of Cauvery water by Karnataka, could have broken the will of any other Government and paralyzed the entire development

process. The steely resolve of the Hon'ble Chief Minister Selvi J Jayalalithaa and her refusal to buckle even in the face of extreme odds, has prevented a collapse of development administration in the State.

46. I am confident that under the strong and dynamic leadership of the Hon'ble Chief Minister, this Government would succeed in securing the very best for the people of Tamil Nadu. I convey my best wishes to all of you in the service of the people of this State.

**Vanakkam**

**Jai Hind**