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Mr. Governor, Mr. Sait Balic, Mr. Rishi,
distinguished guests and my Roma friends:

Welcome to the Roma people to Baro Than. Some of us have met before and some are new faces but all are here in the spirit of friendship. Why am I here? Because I feel a kinship with the Roma people. I have always admired their love of adventure, their closeness to nature and above all, their fortitude and resilience.

Eminent Roma from different countries are with us today and through this the festival will contribute to the strengthening of the already deep-rooted ties between Roma and their Indian fellow humans.

There are fifteen million Roma spread the world over. Their story is one of sorrow and suffering. But it is also the story of the triumph of the human spirit over adversity. The persecution which the Roma have faced so gallantly for nearly a thousand years, marked in our own days by Hitler's genocidal frenzy, makes them an example of courage and endurance. These qualities are associated with India, which they regard as their original home.

The Roma of today retain their identity and indeed have revived it. But they have also integrated themselves into the societies where they now live and are assets to the countries to which they now belong, adding colour, spontaneity and zest for life.

In different countries they are called by different names. They are an international community in the truest sense, and are thus ideally suited to help to bring about international understanding and world peace. After the First World Romani Congress in London in 1971, the Roma have become increasingly aware of their special identity and special role.

Music is very much a part of their being and they have contributed to the development of musical traditions of East and of West. But Roma talents are varied. They permeate every facet of life. For long years, prejudice and persecution veiled their culture and it could not get the recognition and respect which was its due. Its quality is now being acclaimed. The world is the gainer. With the yearning for new ideas and old cultures; the special aspects of Roma Culture will reach out to and touch the hearts of wider audiences.

The multi-lingual Romani dictionary has enabled their language to be codified. The half-yearly journal "Roma" has also been helpful in awakening awareness of this culture in other communities.

It is apt that the Congress is being held here, for the Roma people have an affinity with the Punjab. Roma culture has imbibed and absorbed features of many lands and peoples and it retains memories of elements of Indian civilization. This internationalism has a particular value for our times.

India has also suffered the ignominy of servitude and the myriad ills which attend it but it is now independent and resurgent. Its vast treasure of ancient wisdom is open to the world, a part of the common heritage of humankind. The Roma represent some of this treasure. They are a living example of humankind's ability to overcome travail. We in India have always been proud of our great and unbroken cultural tradition. Can it now withstand the tremendous onslaught?

The Indian people support the effort of the Roma in enriching human culture. Theirs is an example of nationalism within internationalism, beyond prejudice where large heartedness thinks of all people as one big family, living in harmony, trust and peace.

My good wishes to your festival and for your stay in India.