India’s president backs 10 per cent quota for upper castes

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New Delhi: Treading on sensitive political turf, Indian President Ram Nath Kovind on Friday fully backed the 10 per cent reservation for economically backward sections enacted by the Modi government, saying it marked another step towards the India of Mahatma Gandhi’s dreams.

Addressing the nation on the eve of 70th Republic Day, he called the coming Lok Sabha elections “not just a once-in-a-generation moment” but “once-in-a century moment” saying it will shape India for the remainder of the 21st century.

Kovind also said the country belongs to all sections — every group and every community, every region and every identity.

“India’s pluralism is its greatest strength and it’s the greatest example to the world. The ‘Indian model’ rests on a tripod of diversity, democracy and development. We cannot choose one above the other; we must have all the three and, we will have all three,” he said.

The president referred to Gandhi’s book ‘India of My Dreams’ in which he wrote of an India where the poorest will have an “effective voice”, where there will be no “high class and low class”, where “all communities shall live in perfect harmony”, and where “women will enjoy the same rights as men”.

“These ideals are a constant reminder of the India that we are building. In this context, the recent constitutional amendment to provide special facilities for talented children from poorer families is another step to an India of our dreams — and of Gandhiji’s dreams,” he said in an apparent reference to the 103rd Constitution amendment providing for quota for the economically weaker sections that are not covered by any of the existing reservations.

The Bill to provide 10 per cent quota to the economically backward among upper castes was passed by Parliament earlier this month.

Referring to the upcoming general election, he said “each one of us” has the responsibility of voting in the elections.

“The ideas and idealism of our democracy will come into full force. Once more, as we do every five years, voters will deliver their verdict and write their destiny. This year’s election will be the first when voters born in the 21st century will contribute to electing a new Lok Sabha.”

He said election is not just a political exercise, it is a collective call to wisdom and a collective call to action.

The election, he said, represents a renewal and recommitment to the goals of a “shared and egalitarian society”, diverse and yet singular urges of people, and that the act of voting is sacred.

“Who the voter chooses to vote for is up to him or her, I would only request all eligible voters to go out and vote. Our country is at a key juncture. In some respects this is as critical and formative a period as the late 1940s and early 1950s. Decisions and actions of today will shape the India of the remainder of the 21st century. As such, this is not just a once-in-a-generation moment — it is a once-in-a-century moment,” he said.

Kovind said the election is only a milestone in the journey towards fulfilling the aspirations of people and building a developed India and the country was at the doorstep of eliminating extreme poverty for the first time in memory.