

ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE AT THE INAUGURATION OF THE LAUREATES AND LEADERS FOR CHILDREN SUMMIT 2016

Rashtrapat Bhavan Cultural Centre, New Delhi : 10.12.2016

1. It is a privilege for me to attend the Opening Session of the first ever "Laureates and Leaders for Children Summit". At the start, I would like to congratulate Shri Kailash Satyarthi and the Children's Foundation in his name for taking this timely and thoughtful initiative. An esteemed panel of laureates and leaders are attending this summit. The ideas that will generate from here, should therefore, reach a wider audience. I welcome all the distinguished delegates from abroad, particularly the laureates and leaders of Children's Summit, to India. My special greetings to the children and young people congregated here on this occasion!

Ladies and Gentlemen, My dear children:

2. India is a microcosm of the world, with huge diversity of racial groups, cultural patterns, beliefs, climates, topography, and even flora and fauna. Her 1.3 billion people belong to 3 major ethnic groups, speak 122 languages and 1,600 dialects and follow 7 religions. Her strength lies in the unique capacity to fuse apparent contradictions into constructive affirmations. This important conclave held in our country should be an ideal setting for deliberations of such wide import.

3. The core values of our civilization emphasize universal good – welfare of all human beings. These values are intrinsic to the tenets of Alfred Nobel's will and the constitution of the fund that awards (and I quote) "*prizes to those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit to mankind*" (unquote). It has become a tradition for the Nobel Peace Prize to be presented on the tenth of December. Also, on this day in 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations had adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This day is celebrated every year as the Human Rights Day. I call upon this gathering to assimilate this day's significance for humanity, in spirit.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

4. Children (in the age group of 0-14 years) comprise one-fourth of the total human population. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru had once observed and I quote: "*Children are like buds in a garden and should be carefully and lovingly nurtured, as they are the future of the nation*" (unquote). Indeed, through diligent nurturing, children can blossom into fragrant flowers spreading warmth and joy around. However in this age when technological development is spearheading human progress beyond one's imagination, it is disappointing to find many children deprived of opportunities to lead a decent life. There are children still struggling to meet their basic needs for survival. Child labour and bondage are still prevalent despite stringent laws.

5. Problems of varying degree afflicts children – from the seemingly less severe like bullying at school to cases of sexual harassment, child marriage and trafficking. Children are also denied

education in several parts of the world. They are still suffering from malnutrition and are dying of preventable diseases. According to UNICEF, 80 percent of child deaths occur in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. In regions marred by armed conflicts, violence and insurgencies, children are the most affected. There are many children amongst refugees who face an uncertain future.

6.I remember that Shri Satyarthi had raised an important point in his speech in Oslo in 2014. He observed and I quote: "*The children of our world are questioning our inactions and watching our actions*" (unquote). We cannot afford to fail our children. We cannot fail to deliver to them what is due to them. We cannot deprive them the future they can potentially have.

Distinguished participants, Ladies and Gentlemen:

7.In India, we are guided by some powerful laws in this sphere. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 forbids the solemnization of marriage of a child below the age of 21 years for male and 18 years for female. The Indian Penal Code has provisions (sections 315 and 316) against offences like foeticide and infanticide. A National Commission and State Commissions for protection of child rights, and children's courts for providing speedy trial of offences against children or of violation of child rights, have been constituted under a law enacted in 2005. The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 deals with juveniles in conflict with law and children in need of care and protection. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 provides for the protection of children from sexual assault and harassment. The Factories Act, 1948 and The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 prohibits the engagement of children below 14 years in certain employments including factories and regulates their conditions of work in certain other employments. Let us commit ourselves to the noble task of fulfilment and protection of child rights everywhere.

Ladies and Gentlemen, my young friends:

8.Laws will have the desired impact under two conditions: one, if they are properly implemented; and two, if they are complemented by proactive policies. Programmes and actions for children have to take centre-stage in national policy-making. We have a shared responsibility to reduce the inequalities that harm the underprivileged children more than any other age group. The path towards an equal future will come through prioritizing. The disparities in education, health and poverty indicators will have to be eliminated. The factors hampering the progress of disadvantaged children will have to be removed. In this context, initiatives like *A Promise Renewed* movement, under which signatory nations have pledged doing everything possible to stop women and children from dying of causes that are easily preventable, are absolutely necessary. We, indeed, have a moral obligation towards our children; towards their development and security, and in giving them equal opportunity.

9.Education should be the strongest weapon in our fight against inequality. Education neutralizes any disadvantage and equalizes opportunity. We, in India, have prioritized education as one of the key factors for development. It is not a privilege of the elite but a universal right. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 obligates the State to provide education to children in the age group of 6-14 years. The *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* and Mid-day

Meal schemes have aimed at universal access, retention, attendance and quality of learning in the elementary education system of our country. Let our children have all the opportunities to grow with confidence.

Distinguished participants, Ladies and Gentlemen:

10. Our children will inherit a world that we would devolve them. It is our responsibility to ensure that such a world is a better place than what we are given. Exploitation of resources and degradation of the environment is posing a serious challenge to sustainable development. It is manifested in the ill-effects of climate change. Developing economies, which are closely tied to climate-sensitive sectors like agriculture and forestry, are more vulnerable to climate change.

11. A dual approach of preventing climate change and conserving adequate resources for future developmental needs is required. Efficient use of natural resources is reflective of a society that is mindful of its responsibilities towards the present and future generations equally. Let us make this planet a better habitat for our children.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

12. Children often seek wisdom and guidance from elders. I cannot foresee a better set of laureates and leaders present in this congregation to lend their valuable thoughts to the children. On this occasion, I am reminded of Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore's motto: "*Yatra Visvam Bhavati eka nidam*". It means "where the whole world meets in a single nest". The way birds create a safe nest for their young ones, let us create a free, safe, educated and healthy world for our children. In this conclave, gather your thoughts; speak your mind; indulge in debate and discussion; seek answers; develop a vision for a brighter and happier tomorrow. Wishing you Godspeed in your endeavours!

Thank you.

Jai Hind.