

SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE AT THE INAUGURATION OF POLIO CONCLAVE ORGANIZED BY ROTARY INTERNATIONAL

Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi: 29-03-2014

It gives me great pleasure to join you today in celebrating India's polio free status. The official recognition, by the International Certification Commission that India has effectively immunized its population against polio - that there has not been a single case of polio detected in India in the last three years - is a momentous occasion indeed. For a country that was, till only recently, among the worst affected by the virus, this is a landmark achievement.

2. Polio eradication has been a priority health objective of the Government of India. The realization of this goal was made possible by an unprecedented and gigantic programme undertaken by the Government of India across the length and breadth of our country. Government of India and State Governments were supported in this operation by doctors, volunteers, professionals, private enterprises and international organisations. They all came together to make that extraordinary, collective effort – which was necessary to wipe out this crippling disease. International organisations like the UNICEF, WHO and the Rotary International network contributed with a variety of their human and material resources and best practices.

3. To them all, I would like to convey my deep appreciation. I would like to congratulate the countless men and women of India who applied themselves with vigour to implement the initiatives taken up at multiple levels. They worked persistently to spread awareness, administer the polio vaccine and follow up with surveillance investigations and prompt medical attention, wherever required, to achieve the goal that has been accomplished today.

4. In a country like India, where the sheer numbers of our population and access to remote regions is a unique challenge, the fact that the programme reached every corner of our country, that the volunteers were successful in persuading all communities about the importance of immunisation and eliciting their co-operation, repeatedly, for timely administration of the prescribed doses, speaks of the unparalleled dedication of all concerned.

5. As I thank the Rotary International for inviting me today, I recall their unyielding advocacy and relentless efforts, over the years, to execute their comprehensive campaign against polio in all parts of our country.

6. Ladies and Gentlemen, while we rejoice today, we must remind ourselves of those nations whose battle against the polio virus is not yet over - whose children are yet to be properly protected against it.

7. A few weeks ago, on the occasion of India's completion of three years without polio, I had stressed that our success must make us more vigilant: we will continue to be at risk until the whole world is free of the virus. We will need to keep up our watchfulness and preparedness and take all the precautions necessary to ensure that there is no recurrence of this dreadful disease in our country. I do believe that as viruses and diseases do not respect borders, it is in our own interest to assist those populations of the global community that are still vulnerable. I would like our people to reach out to such countries that can benefit from our success and experience. Countries such as Nigeria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, countries in West Africa and even Syria, which are said to be polio infected, can be assisted in so many ways. We can share with them the strategies that brought us success and help them improve their own health systems and infrastructures. As long as polio virus survives anywhere, it is a threat to all populations everywhere.

8. I am confident that we can count on the support of our partners as we join the international community in rooting out the polio virus permanently from the globe. The worldwide network of the Rotary International would be an important asset. They have demonstrated that civil society can play a key role in supporting and supplementing Government's efforts to address challenging health issues; they have set a very good example that will, I am sure, inspire similar partnerships in other areas of healthcare in our country. I do believe that every contribution, big or small, to the overall effort will be invaluable.

9. With these words, I once again congratulate the Union Ministry of Health, State Governments and all those who contributed to making India polio-free. I offer my felicitations to the people of India on this historic day and wish them the best of health and happiness.

Jai Hind!
