
***Inaugural Function of the 8th
Asian Congress of Pediatrics
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**Speech by
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It gives me great pleasure to inaugurate the 8th Asian Congress of Pediatrics. I extend my warm greetings to the 2200 delegates assembled here today from 38 countries. Although from different societies, each with its unique history, culture, traditions, and level of development, you all share a strong common bond: your dedication to the welfare of children.

The protection of one's young is the most basic instinct of any living being. Pt. Nehru, whose own love for children was so manifest, rightly noted that parents "seem to live their lives again in their children". Ensuring the security of the repositories of our hopes and aspirations has been the basis for creating human society, for living collectively. Yet there was a time when the ravages of nature struck down our young with abandon. Our very helplessness made us rationalize these processes and sometimes even accept them under the soothing blanket of tradition. Our inability to cope with tragedies reflected itself in superstitions and in fatalism. The gradual progress of science, however, increasingly gave protection to the unprotected of our species. As new vistas opened up, mankind could deal with the vicissitudes of nature with

growing confidence. But each challenge which we have surmounted has only made us more aware of what remains to be done. Whatever be our achievements so far, let us recognize that large numbers of children are still victim to disease, malnutrition and mortality.

The World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children gives us a graphic description of the problems faced by them. It spoke of countless children around the world exposed to dangers that hamper their growth and development. Children are the casualties of war and violence. They are the victims of cruelty and exploitation. They suffer from hunger and homelessness, from epidemics and illiteracy. The Declaration's reminder that 40,000 children die each day around the world brings home the enormity of the challenge before us.

Independent India, emerging from two centuries of colonialism, was an object of particular concern with regard to the predicament of its children. The infant mortality rate four decades ago was 200 per thousand and life expectancy limited to 40. The leadership of Mahatma Gandhi had already stirred the conscience of the nation about the plight of the down-trodden and the oppressed, children among them. Growing public consciousness and the compulsions of democracy produced their own momentum for change. It was accepted that democracy, as President Radhakrishnan put it, "means that the weakest in the land should be provided with opportunities for self development." The most defenceless of the weak were children and it was but appropriate that the Constitution of free India should reflect the nations' concern about

their state. The Directive Principles of State Policy affirmed our commitment to ensure that the tender age of children is not abused, that they are given opportunities and facilities to develop in a healthy manner, that they can aspire to freedom and dignity and be protected against exploitation and abandonment. This remains our ideal, our goal, our standard for judging ourselves.

The years that have passed have seen a substantial improvement in health parameters in this country. Infant mortality rate has now come down to 79. Under five mortality is now around 26 per thousand. Life expectancy has crossed 60. Programmes dedicated to public health and welfare have contributed a 3 to the improvement of the health status of both women and children. Cost effective interventions have been the focus of these efforts. The Child Survival and Safe Motherhood Programme represents our determination to address the major causes of illness and deaths. The universal immunization programme launched in 1985 covers almost 80% of pregnant women and young children today. We all look forward to the day when its coverage is total. Progress in eliminating neonatal tetanus and poliomyelitis has also been encouraging. The access resulting from the immunization programme has also provided an opportunity to extend other services relating to maternal and child care. The out reach of health facilities to remote corners of this country is noteworthy.

The very progress we have made has provided a stimulus for greater efforts. We have seen what is achievable and must ensure that the fruits of medicine and science are equally distributed. In India itself, regional variations in the health sector are significant. Orissa, for example, has an infant mortality rate of 114 while it is only 17 in

Kerala. Differences across the globe are even sharper. Countries like Japan, USA, Australia and Sweden have one tenth the infant mortality rate of developing countries. As with development as a whole such inequalities in health do not augur well for the stability of the international order. In an era of rising expectations, we would do well to recall Panditji's warning that "the common mass of humanity does not agree to bear the cost of progress at the cost of its own starvation." Let us therefore recognize the problems which children in different parts of the globe still face and resolve to work together to address them.

The infant mortality rate, even though reduced considerably, is still at an unacceptable level. Neonatal mortality has shown little sign of decline. Diarrheal diseases, respiratory diseases, vaccine preventable diseases and lack of maternal and newborn care remain the major causes of mortality in our countries. Malnutrition continues to be a serious problem and contributes directly or indirectly to 60% of child deaths in India. Anemia is still widespread in many women and children. Iodine deficiency is spreading despite the affordability of remedial technologies. Vitamin 'A' deficiency remains a major cause of blindness.

Lack of knowledge is our greatest foe when it comes to public health. If children are neglected, it is because custom, traditions, ignorance and want have overcome the maternal instinct. It is an accepted fact that a child's health and nutrition is much better when the mother is literate. Reduced births are also critical to the reduction of child deaths. Studies have identified that 90 districts in this country with high birth rate have the common characteristics of low female literacy, low age at marriage and high infant mortality. It is evident, there-

fore, that the welfare of children and their protection from their very conception cannot be dealt with from a narrow perspective. Repeated and untimely pregnancies, short inter-pregnancy intervals, early marriage, low birth weight, and pre-term birth are all part of a syndrome which we have to fight. The battles for safe motherhood and for the survival of the child are but two sides of the same coin.

The challenges of reproduction and mortality which we face in India are not uncommon in this continent, or indeed in others. At the beginning of this decade Bangladesh had an infant mortality rate of 105, Brazil of 57, Egypt of 66, Mexico of 39 and Pakistan 103. Our foes are common and so too must be our battle. Success in one corner of globe may well determine events in another. You, the real guardians of our children, are all in the vanguard of a continuous and never ending struggle. In your successes and failures truly lies the course of human history. The burden you

bear is undoubtedly heavy. But it can be lightened by cooperative efforts and mutual endeavours, by common solutions and by timely assistance.

A country where a quarter of the 12 million girls born every year die before their 15th birthday cannot be complacent. A nation which has almost 30 million 'street children' living below the poverty line, and working 12 hours a day, cannot cease even for a moment in looking for solutions. Poverty, illiteracy and parental neglect when fused together are a threat as serious as any which mankind has faced. These are not our problems alone and it is only through global cooperation we can urgently deal with a situation whose daily cost is measured in the lost lives of children. Four decades ago, Pt. Nehru referred to 'the change coming over the scene now and Asia again finding itself.' Our true finding would be only when our children are secure.

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