

Keynote Address by the Prime Minister of India  
Madame Indira Gandhi



Mr. President, Doctor Lechat, Eminent Leprologists, Colleagues, Friends, Distinguished Guests:

We have gathered here as participants in one of humanity's major causes, crusades—the fight against leprosy. The human heart, capable of limitless love and gallantry, is also capable of unbelievable cruelty and callousness. Few groups of persons have been subjected to greater indignity and persecution than those who have had the misfortune to contract this disease. As if the pathos of disfigurement were not enough, they suffer ostracism and abuse. The dread connected with leprosy through the centuries is an index of our own ignorance. Science has disproved one by one the misconceptions and superstitions surrounding it. It has established that the ailment is not hereditarily transmitted. We now know that most varieties are not even infectious. Sages and sacred books of many religions have always taught fellow feeling towards leprosy. Sufferers as well as those who have served them have shown compassion and courage. Father Damien and Albert Schweitzer are held in high respect the world over as examples of such dedication. We have here in front of us Mother Teresa, who is well known all over the world for her own work.

In India, reformers such as Sri Chatanya, Guru Nanak, and Swami Vivekananda have preached the acceptance of leprosy patients on equal terms by others. Mahatma Gandhi's special concern for them is well known. He gave them shelter in his ashrams, and he personally nursed them. Every year the day of his martyrdom, the 30th of January, is observed by us as Martyrs' Day and also as Antileprosy Day.

Once, leprosy was common everywhere. In the last few decades it has been extirpated from several parts of the world but it still affects around 15 million people in about 50 countries. Since the identification of the lepra bacillus as a causative organism, rapid progress has been made in its treatment. New drugs brought real hope in the earlier darkness. As resistance has developed to a particular drug, new regimens of multidrug therapy have evolved. Doctors working in India have made significant contributions to leprology; Dr. E. Muir, Dr. Robert Cochrane, and Dr. Khanolkar deserve mention.

I should like to place on record the gratitude of the Indian people to missionaries from many religious orders who have pioneered leprosy relief and have created awareness in citizens of their duty. Several dedicated social workers have set up homes and workshops for leprosy patients in var-

ious parts of our country. I am glad to find many of them at this Congress.

Leprosy is preventable; it is curable. Early detection and treatment can avert deformity. No longer need patients lead a twilight existence on the fringes of society. However, prejudice and ignorance die hard. Because of the stigma which used to be attached to leprosy, patients and their families are reluctant to have checkups or even admit to the disease until very late, perhaps even too late. This is our single most difficult impediment. Our National Leprosy Control Program lays special stress on early detection. We have invited national and international voluntary organizations to supplement governmental efforts in serving public education and treatment. After the report of the Special Working Group appointed a couple of years ago, we have given a higher priority to this program, re-emphasizing our commitment to the eradication of the disease. I wish we could have more thorough medical checkups in schools, colleges, and hospitals, and for those who work in restaurants and other institutions where there are large numbers of people.

The problem is one of numbers. We have also pressed forward related programs such as the improvement of slums so as to reduce the risk of spreading infection. Investigations show that 95–98% of the population is resistant to leprosy and that over 80% of patients are noninfectious. We now await the development of a preventive vaccine. Such a prophylactic would be a decisive weapon in this battle.

The rehabilitation of leprosy patients is an integral part of leprosy control. Drug therapy must be accompanied by steps to give adequate nutrition to patients who should be encouraged to keep to their vocations. The Government of India has repealed the Indian Lepers Act of 1898 which imposed restrictions on inheritance, marriage, and voting rights. Thus those suffering from leprosy are now given their basic human rights. Leprosy should not mean denial of opportunity to lead an active and useful life.

Deformities create a variety of psychological and physical problems, and come in the way of rehabilitation; hence the importance of plastic surgery. Reconstructive surgery units have been established to restore

cosmetic and functional use of limbs. Therapeutic methods have had to be sustained and improved to mitigate the effects of nerve damage. In the next three years, we propose to take up the multidrug treatment program in nearly 100 regions where leprosy is endemic. We have also launched a campaign to educate people and increase awareness of the latest developments in treatment and rehabilitation. Perhaps—for the first time—we can now visualize a world without leprosy. Smallpox has been wiped out. We can and must also eradicate leprosy. The effort is now at a crucial stage and must be pursued and intensified.

It has been said that a society is judged by the way it treats its most disadvantaged citizens. This is the challenge which we face in India, because in India, as in other developing countries, the number of disadvantaged is very large. It is not merely those who suffer from dread diseases or are handicapped in other ways, but also the large numbers of normal people who because of poverty and economic backwardness can be considered handicapped.

Many of you have traveled over long distances to attend this Congress. The gathering is an expression of the solidarity of interested people from different parts of the world with those who suffer from leprosy. The care of the sick has always been one of the highest impulses of human endeavor. International cooperation is becoming increasingly necessary in every field as we inch forward toward the realization of the concept of one world. I know that here I and all of you are speaking to the converted. What is needed is that we should take these ideas to those who still are not aware of the facts concerning leprosy, and this means education in the widest sense of the word. This education should be taken up not just as part of educational programs but as part of the daily living, the daily contacts, of all human beings no matter where they live, so that the ordinary people are aware of how much can be done and the urgency of being involved in this work—if not actively, at least in preparing the mental attitudes, the social attitudes, which will make the work of our dedicated workers and of governments a little bit easier.

I welcome all those who have come, whether from our own country or from dis-

tant parts. I hope they will find this Congress useful and that your deliberations will not only enthuse those already in the field but will create an atmosphere where this work can gain greater importance and urgency all over. I hope those who have come from

abroad will have an interesting as well as an enjoyable stay while they are in our country.

I give you my greetings. I wish success for your deliberations. And, once more, all my good wishes.