

Shri Pranab Kumar Mukherjee

Dr Hamid Ansari

Dr Manmohan Singh

Ms Sunita Narain

I welcome you all to this evening's presentation of the Indira Gandhi Prize for Peace, Disarmament and Development for 2018. This prize recognizes men, women and institutions whose work has promoted the causes Indira Gandhi espoused, the issues she championed, and the concerns she expressed. In essence, they celebrate her life through their own accomplishments which, so to speak, take forward her legacy.

Indira Gandhi was a deeply committed political personality. Born in a political family, she grew up as a child and teenager as an intimate part of our freedom movement. For 17 years, she lived with our country's first Prime Minister before becoming one herself for 16. But, she was a person of diverse interests. Her contributions to nation-building are well documented. She was equally committed to India's culture, to its arts and crafts, to its heritage. And deep down, she was a passionate naturalist mesmerized by the wonderful natural heritage of India, dazzled by the glorious biodiversity of India and firmly determined to preserve and protect it.

In late 1971, even while being completely engrossed in the grave crisis on India's eastern border with Pakistan, she found time to initiate action that would lead to the passage of the landmark law to protect our wildlife. In the midst of all political crises, she found time to launch various conservation programmes of which Project Tiger has become the most iconic. She was the only foreign head of government to address the first UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in June 1972. Her speech there still reverberates. Indeed, it is in this speech that Indira

Gandhi most powerfully and eloquently linked the three themes of today's prize—peace, disarmament and development.

I mention this dimension of Indira Gandhi's personality with a purpose. A few weeks back the Indira Gandhi Prize for National Integration was conferred on the activist Chandi Prasad Bhatt. Today, the Indira Gandhi Prize on Peace, Disarmament and Development is being given to India's pioneering environmental NGO—the Centre for Science and Environment.

There is a little known story that links Indira Gandhi, Shri Bhatt and the CSE that was founded by Anil Agarwal over three and a half decades ago. One of Indira Gandhi's very first interviews, after she had returned as Prime Minister in January 1980, was to Anil Agarwal for the well-known British science magazine called *Nature*. In that conversation, Indira Gandhi spoke of the Chipko movement which had been spearheaded by Chandi Prasad Bhatt. Questioned by Anil Agarwal she spoke of the urgency to protect India's forests. A few months later the landmark Forest Conservation Bill was passed.

Since its establishment, CSE has become virtually India's conscience in the fight to preserve, protect and improve our natural environment. Over the years it has striven to raise awareness of the problem long before it became the major crisis we face today. From the days, decades ago, when Anil Agarwal was invited to educate and inform members of parliament about environmental issues, it has played a pivotal role, using reason, argument and knowledge to push governments to be proactive. We who live in this capital, notorious now as the world's most polluted city, can recall the difference in air quality when compressed natural gas was introduced in public vehicles. This transformation was made possible by the persuasive expertise of the CSE and the Congress government of the

day. If only there were a similar one-step solution to today's bad air problem.

The Centre has worked closely with governments in other initiatives to reduce pollution such as:

- *a reduction in the use of diesel and an improvement in its quality;
- *reducing water consumption in the manufacture of paper using wood not from natural forests but trees plantations;
- *profit sharing by mining companies with deprived local communities

It's work on water conservation and sanitation has been internationally recognized long before the current focus on these issues. Its pollution monitoring laboratory is the only one of its kind run by a civil society organization in India. Critically, it has worked hard to establish the principle of equity in the approach to climate change discussions, emphasizing the great need to be fair to the poorest who are the worst hit by this global phenomenon. This has helped bring India's concerns and interests centre-stage. And, the CSE's annual state of the environment reports are an assessment and critique of how we're doing on our journey towards cleaner, sustainable progress.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Sunita Narain, who is receiving the award today on behalf of the CSE, has herself been an untiring spokesperson for environmental causes and has situated her campaign in the larger context of livelihoods and economic development. By honouring the CSE today I feel we are not only recognizing the quality and scope of its work, we are recalling a vital aspect of who Indira Gandhi really was, and taking forward the pioneering work that she performed far ahead of her time.