

Acceptance Speech for the Indira Gandhi Prize 2018, awarded to the Centre for Science and Environment on November 19, 2019

Sunita Narain

Dear Soniaji, Shri Mukerjee, Shri Ansari, Doctor Saab and all our friends. We are deeply honoured, indeed humbled to get this Prize. Thank you so much for recognizing the work of the Centre for Science and Environment. My colleagues and I accept this Prize with gratitude, but also with the awareness that so much needs to be done. All our work; all our efforts must add up – we have to make a difference in this increasingly climate change risked and insecure world. Your recognition will give us courage to persist. But more importantly, it underscores the imperative of action. Urgent action.

This honour means a lot to my colleagues and to me, because we believe Mrs Indira Gandhi brought the environmental concern to national stage in the 1970s, it was she who was the only world leader who went to Stockholm in 1972 to attend the first global conference on environment and development; she brought in the water act; the air act; and most environmental legislations that have worked to safeguard us. She saw the need to address this existential crisis, before anyone else – environment was not a buzzword for her. It was real. It was urgent. Her foresight, her wisdom is what we need today.

Today we all understand the imperative and the sheer desperation of the crisis. When every breath we take is toxic, we know that we have a crisis that needs to be fixed. We know also that climate change is not an empty threat anymore. It is real. It is happening. The weird weather events that are hitting the world should make us sit up; in India the monsoon is changing – I say again and again, the true finance minister of India, was not, is not, Mr Mukerjee, Doctor Saab or Nirmalaji – it is the monsoon. Today, we are seeing extreme rain events like never before; we go from flood to drought; the intensity and frequency of cyclones has increased; the poor who did not contribute to the emissions in the atmosphere are the victims. And remember, this is just the beginning. We are at 1 degree C rise since 1880 and the speed at which the world is pumping greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere will be definitely breach the guardrail of 1.5 degree C – considered the least risky by scientists. Climate change is hitting the poor today; but it will not spare the rich tomorrow.

This is where we must pause and rethink our strategies. When Mrs G said “poverty is the greatest polluter” (there are many interpretations her statement made in 1972), I believe she spoke about the need for inclusive development. Today we know, we cannot have sustainable development and we cannot have peace, without growth that is affordable and inclusive. Why do I say that?

Air pollution we know is the greater equalizer – the rich and the poor breathe the same air. Unlike water pollution, where the rich can move to bottled water, here there is no solution. The air purifier is not the answer. If we want our right to clean air, we have to clean the air outside. This means that we have to recognize that the airshed is one – the emissions of the woman cooking her food on biomass; farmers burning crop residues because they are poor; or industry using dirty fuel because it keeps them competitive and the diesel SUV of the rich all go into the same space – in the same air we breathe.

Therefore, the solutions have to be inclusive. Today, less than 20% of Delhi owns a car or drives; rest take 2-wheelers or bus or cannot even afford this and walk or cycle. But cars occupy 90 of the road space; roads occupy 26% of the city’s land area. We are already polluted and congested. Where then is the space for the remaining 80% to take a car. But this is also our opportunity; If we can plan and implement a public transport system that is both affordable for the poor and convenient, safe and modern enough for the rich, we can transform mobility; fix our pollution. Inclusive, then is sustainable.

It is the same with water pollution – most of India is not connected to the underground pipeline grid of the rich. My colleagues have done **shit-flow diagrams** for cities and they show that most of our cities are dependent of what we would call septic systems. If we cannot design affordable sanitation systems for the poor, then our rivers cannot be cleaned; and the cost of dirty water in a climate risked world will be unbearable. It will make us even more water-insecure.

In an increasingly unequitable and climate-risked world, we must also re-think **peace and security**. We know that every drought, flood, cyclone takes away the development dividend that governments work so hard to build; it takes away homes; roads; livelihoods; it then costs more to rebuild; to restart from the very beginning. It is corrosive. It means that people – however resilient – cannot cope anymore. They have no option but to leave their homes, their villages and go in search – no longer of temporary – but permanent new

homes, livelihood. They join the millions of migrants to cities and to new countries. We don't know how many are in our cities today because our official counting is always 10 years out of date. But I can tell you that today, most Indian cities are growing in the illegal. This suggests massive movement of people; it will make city governance more difficult. But more importantly, this tipping of the scales of migration, means that politics of immigration will and has become even more nasty, more angry and is feeding insecurity, not just of the poor but also of the already rich.

Our interconnected world has two simultaneous jeopardies – one it transports climate-altering carbon dioxide emissions from one country to the global atmosphere and two it transports global news at the speed of mobile telephony. The push and the pull will only increase in this context.

This is not the world we want our children to inherit. And this is where Anil Agarwal, CSE's founder would say: "We have a duty to hope".

We have to work our democracies; build the public opinion on the imperative of change; keep the focus on the possibility (the sheer adventure) of the solution; be bold; fearless and most important ensure that you keep your credibility and independence. This is where we at CSE – my colleagues and our very extended family of supporters and colleagues – will keep ourselves grounded. There is much more to do. When we began our work, we were innocent – it seemed so easy. Now the challenge is massive; daunting even. Every winter in the smog we (I) want to give up. But we can't. We owe it to you the enormous love and respect that we receive from all of you to continue. Be that dog with the bone. Persist and persevere. We have to.

So, thank you again the esteemed Trustees of the Indira Gandhi Memorial Trust and the eminent jury for putting your trust in us. On behalf of all my colleagues at CSE, I accept the 2018 Indira Gandhi Prize, with great humility and pride.