

OPENING REMARKS BY THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF INDIA TO UNESCO, MR VINAY SHEEL OBEROI

Madame Bukova, thank you for those moving words and for reminding us of the message of love and peace that Mother Teresa spread throughout the world.

Excellency, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my privilege to speak this evening, on behalf of my people and my country, on an occasion that honours one of our most well-known and well-loved citizens. This is indeed a very special evening - to remember and to celebrate the life and times, and the message - of a very special person. We wish to thank UNESCO and the Director General for the gesture and the partnership that has enabled the joint commemoration of the centenary of the birth of Mother Teresa. The flags behind me, as I speak, bear testimony to this collaboration.

With us today are three eminent persons, each of whom has known Mother Teresa well and over a long period of time.

Monsignor Francesco Follo, the representative of the Holy See has been associated with the Missionaries of Charity over several decades. He has shared with me, over the past few weeks, several anecdotes of Mother Teresa, and in doing so has allowed me an appreciation of her world, her thoughts. He will, no doubt, later this evening share some of those insights with all of us.

Sister Joanne, the Senior Councilor of the Missionaries of Charity has traveled from Kolkata bringing a message from Sister Prema, the superior general of the Missionaries of Charity, who was unable to come.

Our keynote speaker is Mr. Navin Chawla, a distinguished civil servant and the official biographer of Mother Teresa. He has recently demitted the high and constitutional office of the Chief Election Commissioner of India - I can assure you that there are few more challenging positions than that of the Chief Election Commissioner, entrusted with superintendence and oversight of elections across the vast, vibrant and voluble democracy that is India. Despite his many and diverse responsibilities, Mr. Chawla kept up a close and deep association with Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity, and I look forward to the portrait of Mother Teresa that he will paint for us on his canvas.

As we look back on the twentieth century, Mother Teresa emerges as indeed a remarkable figure of a remarkable era. Inspirational and charismatic she worked tirelessly for the downtrodden, the poor, the sick, those who were uncared for or unloved - and the lonely. Through her life she constantly engaged - through words and actions - the theme of loneliness, the feeling of being unwanted.

She spent her formative years on one continent, and worked for most of her life in her adopted country on another continent. In the last decades of her life and of that century, her work had grown to encompass every continent and over a hundred countries.

Mother Teresa fought a war, an unending series of battles against hatred, misery, deprivation, and sufferings. Mother Teresa may have looked frail and diminutive. Her smile was disarming. She was however tough and unrelenting in her cause, determined and truly a redoubtable foe.

Her weapons were chosen by her - love, compassion, understanding and kindness.

In the Missionaries of Charity, the order that she founded, she had a formidable army, all soldiers of peace, devoted and dedicated to the cause. The Sisters of the Order, clad in their simple and distinctive white sarees with blue borders are now enduring symbols of hope, humanity and humility.

Mother Teresa was the recipient of honours and awards galore. India conferred upon her, in 1980, its highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna. The Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, the Pope John XXIII Peace Prize (1971) and the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education (1992) - were but a few of the many. My feeling, however, is that awards meant only so much to her - her work was her reward, and her reward was her work. An immensely practical and determined person, she exhorted each one of us to act, to answer our own call within a call - "do not wait for leaders; do it alone, person to person" she said - "if you can't feed a hundred people, feed just one".

Mother Teresa was indeed a very special person.

May I, on behalf of all of us thank Madame Irina Bukova, the Director General of UNESCO and our three speakers - Monsignor Follo, Sister Joanne and Mr. Navin Chawla.

I would also like to thank the following persons for their support:

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And, of course, my team, my colleagues at the PDI - thank you.