

Our Times

Observations of
Shri Gopalkrishna Gandhi,
Governor of West Bengal,
at the
Ladies' Study Group Charitable Trust Annual Award Ceremony
The Taj Bengal
Kolkata
April 7 2009

It is a pleasure to be a guest of the Ladies' Study Group and to participate in the award function today. It is a privilege to honour Smt. Sarla Birla and Smt. Amala Shankar. They symbolize the best in our legacy of culture and civilization.

My thanks to the LSG for its hospitality and congratulations to CHIP.

Seeing the CHIP children I could not help recalling the song from Bollywood, *Taare Zamin Par*.

We have seen some of those *taare* today. They are *taare*, of course; no doubt about that. The question is : *Baaqi hum log jo hain, ham kab zamin par utrenge ?*

We live in denial. Many denials.

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Our Times

'It was the best of times', Dickens says in the opening lines of *A Tale of Two Cities*, 'it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...'

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What are our times like ?
Is ours the age of wisdom ?

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To be sure, there are some truly wise people in our world. We have Nelson Mandela. We have the Dalai Lama.

Read Chris Patten's *What Next?* and you will know we have non-Nobel wise people in our midst also.

Read Nandan Nilekani's *Imagining India* and you will feel the same. Lord Patten's book is sub-titled *Surviving The Twenty-first Century*. Nilekani's is sub-titled *Ideas For The New Century*. Nilekani reminds us that India has the world's largest population of young people. Demographically speaking, therefore, India is the youngest country in an ageing world. That gives us reason to think for, work for and hope for 'survival' in our much-hyped century.

Leaders and books apart, there is Oprah Winfrey, a leader in her own way. I find her to be wise and compassionate, clever and serious trusting and frank. In short, everything one would want a friend to be.

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So, there *is* wisdom in our times and young wisdom at that.

There is no dearth of Belief in our times either. Not of the right kind, I am afraid.

The mindset of those who are satisfied with what they believe in, who are untroubled by doubt and anxiety is not my favourite mindset.

Those who swear by religion, or by science, by that great God – Money – and those who believe in 'my country, right or wrong', or 'my community, wrong or right', 'my party, especially when wrong', those who will bet their money (but also your money and mine) to say free marketing is the world's panacea. And those at the other end who will regulate everything including and especially free thinking.

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Is ours the season of light?

In our times where everything is as nuanced as the twilight, it amazes me that anyone should think the equinox makes ours the season of light. Or midnight that of darkness.

Is our season the 'spring of hope'?

When we see the glow of expectation on young girls in our State's schools, I see the spring of hope.

When we hear of men beating up girls in Mangalore and more recently of the whipping of that tragic girl by the Taliban in Pakistan, I see the coldest despair.

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We deny hope a chance.

Equally, we deny the fact that foolishness reigns, darkness engulfs it, despair overpowers it.

Ours should be called the age of denial.

Three first class crises, global in their sweep, like a millennial pandemic, hold us in their talons. The first of these is the global meltdown. This has meant loss of livelihood to thousands of families. And will, to more.

The second is global terror. This has caused loss of life to tens of thousands of people. And can be expected to lead to more.

The third is global warming. This can end life-cycles on earth as we have known them. And not on some remote date from now.

In our lifetime, it may be, we will see certain features and forms of life as we know them, fold up, taking us with them.

And yet.

Knowing better today than ever before that money is a bubble, we obsess about where a money-powered cricket team bought through open bidding is going to hold its commercially-endorsed matches.

Knowing that terror intends not just to kill but also to divide, some of us think and even talk of communities in terms of 'them' and 'us', thereby becoming terror's unwitting stooge .

Knowing that the climate is changing much faster than ever imagined, we do little to start adapting to the challenge let alone mitigating the change.

Ours has to be the age of denial.

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Nine thousand jobs have been vanishing on an average each day, this year. Lay-offs may have crossed the three hundred thousand mark by now. From electronics and telecom – our New Age miracle-workers – to pharma, job cuts are the order of the day. Not a single person from the postgraduate programme of the IIM Calcutta has got an overseas placement in this year. The Federation of Indian Export Organisations has stated that over 10 million jobs have been lost due to the downswing in exports this year.

Sheer greed is responsible; Corporate greed based on human credulousness, and individual greed.

But we in civil society have made little or no change in life-styles – not in the way we use petrol, electricity. The Mac burger is a good symbol used by Chris Patten. It continues to swell and our collective mouth opens wider and wider for it.

Ours has to be the age of 'denial'.

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Terror is the most dangerous child of our nuclear age.

Cold War nuclear deterrence was premised on the principle 'if you can destroy me, I should be able to destroy you'. It was called 'mutually assured destruction'; known by the acronym MAD.

Not the nuclear bomb used by its six authors plus one owner - Pakistan - so much as its theft and use by non-State powers is a real danger.

When Gandhi was assassinated many memorable statements were made by world leaders. One went almost unnoticed. It was by a woman. No surprise there! Women are generally unnoticed. The woman was Mary Bethune, founder of the National Council for Negro Women (as it was then called) in the US.

Mary Bethune said : 'As we mothers of the world stand in awesome fear of the roar of jet planes, the crash of the atom bomb and the unknown horrors of germ warfare, we must turn our eyes to the techings of...' and she invoked the slain man. That was in January 1948.

Not the fact that Nuclear States including ourselves own 27000 bombs in their arsenals but the fact that nuclear devices can be stolen and inducted by terror organisations, is what we must know. Also, that Mary Bethune's grim prognosis is near realisation in hands even she would not have imagined.

There is the 'dirty' bomb, the radiological device that can sprinkle radioactive stuff using (I am told) *cesium* and *cobalt* to detonate the device. That bacteriological and chemical weapons have been and are being 'developed' by States and can be stolen and deployed by non-State players is no secret.

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To complete the picture, I must add that mass weapons are in fact the lesser of the dangers of violence facing us.

There is the phenomenon of small arms. Small can be deadly.

Can you guess how many AK-47s there are in the world ?

Google tells me there are 75 million AK-47s in the world today. These are 'real' AK-47s. There are any number of adapted versions, no less deadly for being so. They have been seen with groups that have cash, including drug mafiosi, the Taliban and Al-Quaida and Colombian guerrillas.

The Colombian musician and pacifist Cesar Lopez picked up an AK-47 and literally modified it to turn it into a guitar which he named *escopetarra*, combining '*escopeta*' which means 'gun' and 'guitarra'. What a beautiful answer to violence !

But South Asia is an expert in contrivance and in copying, adaptation and 'adjusting'.

The television told me four days ago that there is a euphemism used by terror outfits for an AK-47. You can guess. Lopez would be shocked. *Kitney guitar hain tere paas ?* one don was heard asking a potential mercenary.

General Mikhail Kalashnikov who designed the AK-47 after retiring, took to manufacturing vodka. If only he had chosen the spirit earlier...

Ours has to be the age of 'denial'.

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I will finish now, with the last globalisation of our times, Global Warming.

This year - 2009 - has been found to be among the five warmest years on record. And the forecast for the next five years is worrisome. Permafrost melts, the Antarctica is getting less and less cold.

The Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) has said we can do nothing now to prevent the climate over our planet from rising to at least 1.4 degrees C above the pre-industrial level. If we are able to contain warming at something like 2 degrees C or below, we would still "face some pretty major changes" and if we do not do even that, water scarcity will grow, there will be more droughts in the tropics and mid-latitudes, there will be more Katrinas (not the star, alas, but the hurricane), migrations, conflicts and disease.

And yet...

What are we doing ?

Some have made changes, major lifestyle changes.

But despondency can overtake all these initiatives if more is not done, and fast.

India is known to stir itself to galvanic action in the face of tragedy, of catharsis.

But at other times, we remain 'plunged in thought' and inactivity.

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I will not conclude on so grim a note.

On the global meltdown, India almost unwittingly shows a way out. The temperament of saving among our people, our banks' caution in the matter of lending and our farm sector have saved the day for us and can show the world that liberalism must be guided by a regulatory hand.

On global terror, the case for hope rests on the fact that despite provocations, our social fabric has held firm.

And on global warming, let us acknowledge the fact that awareness is growing steadily and initiatives quite close to home can make us feel proud.

Wherever an individual or an institution is recognised doing the right thing, wherever wisdom is seen, confidence spotted, where light is seen trying to overcome darkness, there we must join our individual energies.

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Someone deeply concerned about the environment, was walking on the Coromandel beach last week. She saw baby-turtle tracks on the sand and decided to follow them to see if she could be

lucky enough to find baby turtles going to their home, the sea. She saw one. Only, this one was walking in the wrong direction. It was a hot morning, there were crows around, and stray dogs. She picked the little thing up and placed it back on the sand, this time in the right direction. It raced forward, as its instincts intended it to, and the little thing wafted into the sea.

The life principle is not dead.

Our times are fraught, but we belong to them.

We can help the turtle which belongs to the sea to head towards it. If only we are watchful, if only we begin to change, ever so little though that change may be. Our Times.

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