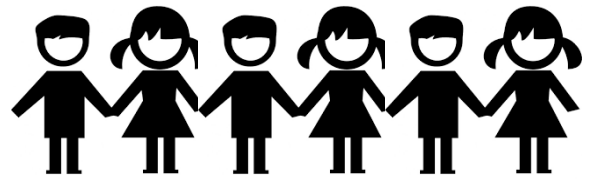


# India's Children



The heritage, the milestones, and the future promise for children, for child health in India

Acceptance speech delivered at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Coimbatore on 28<sup>th</sup> July, 2021

**“If we are to reach real peace in this world, we shall have to begin with children.”**

**Mahatma Gandhi**

Respected Ayyah, distinguished fellow members of the Management Committee of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, our dedicated teachers and our bright young students, ladies and gentlemen, I stand here with a deep sense of gratitude. Gratitude for this first public felicitation since I received the Harvard T. H. Chan Award for ‘Leadership in Public Health Practice’ and the immense love I have received from Akka and you, Ayyah over the decades. I could not have asked for a better setting than the Bhavan. Nearly 50 years ago, Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel, a co-founder of this illustrious institution of India wrote,

“May this institution become the nursery of torchbearers of this composite civilization, taking just pride in all that is good in the past, imbibing all that is noble in the present, shedding light and glory wherever they go moulding the life and destiny of this great nation”.

**It is this composite civilization, its gifts, and its many historic milestones that I am reminded of today. Today, I am also reminded of Mahatma Gandhi** and the inspiration he has become to generations of Indians, including mine, to be the torchbearers of a culture of peace and a lived experience where not only our interconnectedness is acknowledged but where service, service to humanity, is recognized as a collective and ethical obligation. Thank you Ayyah for letting me stand against this immense backdrop and for the loving presence of my beloved teacher, my mentor, Dr. M. Ramswamy and so many in this gathering today who are part of my life. It is therefore a privilege and a blessing to share my joy, my work in public health and my commitment to India's Children with you this morning.

**There are many dimensions to the coming together and the celebration this morning, from our legacy to the Bhavan's** active presence and service through its 395 institutions across India. It is also a celebration of the Bhavan's visionary leaders in Coimbatore from Shri.G.K. Sundaram in 1964 to Dr.B.K. Krishnaraj Vanavarayar today, who have as Chairmen of the Coimbatore Kendra continued to infuse the richness of our art, culture and literature into the city's composite culture. For nearly six decades, the Bhavan has also encouraged the city's leaders to take charge and advance the common good and has given Coimbatore's citizens many platforms to think together and actively collaborate. Our schools continue to shape young minds in very special ways.

**On joyous occasions such as this, one's mind lifts many memorable experiences like the visit of Madam Ela Gandhi** in this very campus to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, the celebration of our golden jubilee, the induction of our Chairman into the Central Committee of the Bhavan Family, and wonderful concerts that the Bhavan's Children's choir continue to bring us. Each of these memories is refreshed today!

**We are also meeting this morning under a very challenging circumstance, the COVID-19 pandemic, a Public Health** crisis that has a parallel only with the Spanish flu that affected the human family a hundred and nine years ago. This pandemic has affected almost every country, over 200 is what we are counting now, and as of this morning, the Johns Hopkins Dashboard tell us that **195,232,649** people across the world have tested positive to COVID-19, and of

those, **31,440,951** are in India. The just settling second wave of the pandemic affected us all in ways we have never experienced before.

**We hear these numbers so often that even the data so clearly presented leaves us a bit overwhelmed, a bit numb.** Day after day this updated epidemiological data provides us with the same refrain - the virus continues to mutate, the number of people testing positive has maintained an upward slant, people continue to die because of COVID-19, and its ramifications have affected every aspect of daily life.

**School closures have exceeded 490 days in India.** The school closures have affected our children in very complex ways and with multiple intersections between physical health, mental health, social and spiritual health. While even by April 2020 we knew that over 1.5 billion children were affected worldwide, it is only in the past six months that we have a better picture of the impact of prolonged school closures on a generation of children. We must carefully study the evidence, the data and the human experience that is coming in. The Public Health crisis is accompanied by a learning crisis, a crisis of imminent hunger for many of our children, a mental health crisis together with rising violence against children in the form of child sexual abuse, child marriage, child labour and exploitation.

**UNICEF warns that progress to end child labour has stalled for the first time in 20 years,** reversing the previous downward trend that saw child labour fall by 94 million between 2000 and 2016. The number of children in child labour has risen to 160 million worldwide, and globally, 9 million additional children are at risk of being pushed into child labour by the end of 2022 as a result of the pandemic<sup>i</sup>. In India, the 220 million children who rely on the government's 'School Health Program' to provide them with health services ranging from anaemia screening to micronutrient management to the provision of mid-day meals in their schools have been cut off from these services as schools remained closed<sup>ii</sup>. Nearly 500 days of school closures in India has meant disruption to critical developmental and preventive health services for children.

The growth and development trajectory of a whole generation of children we are still uncertain of given that the pandemic still continues. But it is in the very midst of this pandemic that we must lift ourselves to make the cause of children a priority both during the pandemic and beyond, even as we prepare to build back better.

**If you allow me your indulgence, I would like to share my thoughts around India's Children, the milestones we have crossed together as a nation, and as people, and the future promise for children, for child health in India.**

**I hope in doing so I will be able to share with you the good work that my mentor, my teacher Dr.M.R's generation** has done to make childhood a more health and happy experience since 1947. I hope it will also present to you the tremendous work that our generation has yet to do, work that professionals like me and leaders like you must do so that every child gets a healthier start to life. This vision is still a work in progress; it is still not the majority experience for India's children in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This extraordinary moment in history, the COVID-19 Pandemic, gives an opportunity to re-visualize the way we have served 'our children', to understand why the progress in child health and development is still so fragile, and why investment of thought, word, action and resource will be key to ensuring the dignity of every child, the dignity of all our children.

In everyday conversations between grandparents and grandchildren, in our homes and during our childhood, it was not uncommon for them to refer to their siblings, with a quick disclaimer that of the four only three survived, of the five only two survived. They had a similar story to share of their own children. My own grandmother spoke of how of the three children she had the joy of conceiving, only one survived, her only son – my father. Appa grew up under her watchful eye, her affectionate care, the absolute investment of every hour she had, and every rupee she earned

her entire life. Even while she thoroughly enjoyed watching her child grow, in the first years of Appa's life she recalled that she worried if her child would contract a disease or fall ill. Around her, it was not uncommon for parents to lose their children to various factors, particularly to disease exacerbated by disruption. Public health professionals like me would describe this as a high child mortality context and one that directly influences life expectancy. In the 1940s and 1950s, an average Indian child was expected to live 32-36 years (life expectancy). Today, if a newborn arrives in the Vanavarayar family, the little child will have a life expectancy of over 68 years. How did this transformation happen? How did a doubling and more of life expectancy take place in less than 75 years? Some important factors come from the field of medicine and included better antenatal care, safe hospital deliveries, neonatal care, early introduction to mother's milk, and routine immunization. Many more came from the adequate availability of food as a result of the Green Revolution, from increasing education and literacy of young parents, from better family income and from progressive laws this country gave itself, like the minimum age of marriage. This moving out from a high mortality situation to today, where the possibility of a child reaching their full potential exists, suggests that a holistic plan that is informed by science & society has to be in place. **It requires Governments to invest in future looking policies for children, concrete interventions, dialogue with the healthcare community and cognizance of the socio-economic factors that directly impact children and their wellbeing.** The popular African proverb, 'It takes a village to raise a child' is a shared practical wisdom in this part of the world too, that the needs of children will need the coming together of all of us.

Another success story to celebrate is that of school enrolment in our country. India's literacy rate was abysmally low in 1947. Thanks to progressive policy, the additional thrust of the National Literacy mission in 1986 of which both my parents were part of, and unprecedented people's participation, we have achieved a near impossible - an almost 100 % school enrolment. That means every child who should be in school, is in school. This is a wonderful achievement and must make us believe that our children will increasingly transition to higher education, thus making human development more productive, more holistic and meaningful.

**Even while we have crossed these significant milestones together,** of which I have mentioned only two – the overcoming of child mortality and vast increases in school enrolment - there are many, many areas where there has been a steady flattening of investments and consequentially a lack of progress for children. I am reminded of a quote by a former Executive Director of UNICEF who said that "Creating a world that is truly fit for children does not imply simply the absence of war. It means having the confidence that our children would not die of measles or malaria. It means having access to clean water and proper sanitation. It means having primary schools nearby that educate children, free of charge. It means changing the world with children, ensuring their right to participate, and that their views are heard and considered. It means building a world fit for children, where every child can grow to adulthood in health, peace and dignity<sup>iii</sup>."

**This is where I draw your attention to the work half done, the unfinished agenda when it comes to child health (and child development) where we can collaborate to unleash the potential, the promise of our children in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.**

During this COVID-19 pandemic, I was listening to Aditya Narayanan, our Bhavan's alumni and a young volunteer at Shanti Ashram, singing Manathil Uruthi Vendum at the Ashram. 7-year-old Gautham, alumni from one of Shanti Ashram's Bala Shanti Kendras was also listening in. As the song concluded, I turned to Gautham and asked "Manasu Yenga Irukku thangam?" He thought for a second and pointed to his heart, then he returned again after a few minutes and pointed to his head and "Ingaiyum iruku"...and after 20 minutes he declared confidently, "Manasu Ingai irukku," pointing to his heart, "Ingaiyum irukku," pointing to his head, "aana manasu namalai vida perisu". Such is the wisdom, the potential of children. We as a nation are yet to harness this potential fully. Even while children make up 39% of India's 1.3 billion population, our investment in their wellbeing has been extremely low. Less

than 3% of GDP is allocated to children. And even as the pandemic continues to affect our children, their needs have not been prioritized enough. In fact, budget allocations for child development have come down by more than 1,000 crores this year<sup>iv</sup>. This will not help us become the developed country we want to be. It will make the immediate ecosystem of our children more fragile, and allow for the viscous cycle of disease, deprivation, and disruption to go on.

**While delivering the first Parliamentary Prof. Hiren Mukerjee Oration in 2008, ‘Demands of Social Justice’, Bharat Ratna Prof. Amrtya Sen** said humorously that the only reason he can think of as to why children don’t receive proportionate, if not prioritized, budget allocations (despite making up a significant part of India’s population) is because they “don’t have a vote”. If they had the right to vote, they would count... things would be different, he said! He however went on to elaborate that “a democratic government has to adhere to the ‘niti’ and ‘nyaya’ in delivering social justice and must respond to on-going priorities. There are simultaneous manifestations of severe injustice in India today such as appalling levels of continued child undernourishment, lack of entitlement to basic education and medical attention of the poorer members of the society. Whatever else ‘nyaya’ may demand (and we can have all sorts of different views of what a perfectly just India would look like), the reasoned humanity of the justice of ‘nyaya’ can hardly fail to demand the urgent removal of these terrible deprivations in human lives.” In that very oration, Prof. Sen also gave a simple way to help select the priorities for Parliamentarians, the law-makers of our land: "To think more clearly about what should be done, we have to ask what should keep us awake at night".

**This common sense approach and the rightful place of children on our national agenda is what I am requesting for** in the midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Inequities in health and development are a central concern of the health sector in India. The World Health Organization states that one of the most efficient ways of ‘closing the gap’ in health inequities within a population is to address the needs of those who are most vulnerable. Research further shows that children and families who are vulnerable because of their social and material circumstances shoulder a disproportionate burden of disease and poverty, as we have seen them do during the pandemic.

**One might say that our governments have the responsibility to bridge these inequalities and care for India’s children.** It must prioritise the improvement of the primary health care system in this country, it must allocate more resources, it must re-visualize the quality and the provisioning of preventive pediatric interventions like vaccines, the giving of Vitamin A and micro-nutrients, and the bi-annual de-worming of children. It must train more healthcare providers and improve the quality of services. The return on these simple public health investments in children will not only ensure better health but also a more healthy and hopeful start to life for our children. The Pandemic has further shown us that if health is disrupted, life is stalled for an individual, a nation and indeed for the global community. Like Education, I hope we can successfully prioritize health as a valued public good, one that changes the quality of life of individuals and communities decisively.

**While asking Governments to take the lead, we should also come together as citizens to think of our roles in** ensuring better health for ALL. Nearly 6 decades ago, there was no Paediatric clinic in Coimbatore. One trained and devoted Paediatrician who decided to prioritize children and their health altered the course of Coimbatore’s children. He helped build 6 institutions that included the Department of Paediatrics at the Coimbatore Medical College, establishing the busiest Children’s hospital in Coimbatore, the Masonic Medical Centre for Children and the International Center for Child and Public Health, a unique institution that integrates primary care and public health. He has trained generations of doctors like me and forged lasting relationships with the children themselves. Yes, he is Dr. M. Ramswamy, one who has the unique distinction of touching the lives of a million children. Committed healthcare professionals like him have mobilized the good will of all to create this unique collaborative model of healthcare.

At the entrance of the Masonic Hospital, you will read the quote, ‘My name is today, my bones and my blood is forming now... do not postpone my needs, do not neglect my cry, for tomorrow may never be a reality for me.’

**On this happy occasion, I stand honoured and supported in my commitment to advancing the health, the progress** of every child of this wonderful nation of ours, India. We have crossed many milestones, but many more have yet to be crossed before we can say with sincerity to our children, ‘You are our most treasured gifts, you deserve the best science and spirituality have to offer, for in your growth, in your development, we see the living heritage of India continue. In you we will see our own torchbearers who have not only blossomed to their full potential but are also empowered with the vision of a more equal, more humane and more united India.’

To this task, to the future promise for children, for child health in India, may we retrieve our faith, our resolve, our creativity and our resources.

**You are a learned gathering, a community of leaders who have already chosen to care**, by the very choice of your public roles and leadership positions. I stand alongside you as a child health practitioner, a leader in public health practice, a daughter of this wonderful country and fellow citizen to rededicate ourselves to India’s Children, to their needs and to their potential, to their participation and to realizing their dreams, to carrying forward this unique lived experience called India. I am reminded of India’s much loved poet Rabindranath Tagore’s words which beautifully describe the world we can strive for, work towards, and ensure for our children:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;  
Where knowledge is free;  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;  
Where words come out from the depth of truth;  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms toward perfection;  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;  
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action -  
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake  
**Into that heaven of freedom may India’s Children, ALL of her children grow and thrive, participate and contribute!**



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President,  
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International Center for Child and Public Health (ICPH)

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<sup>i</sup> UNICEF Press Release < <https://www.unicef.org/india/press-releases/child-labour-rises-160-million-first-increase-two-decades>>

<sup>ii</sup> Ministry of Education, Government of India

<[http://mdm.nic.in/mdm\\_website/Files/School%20Health%20Programme/Guidelines\\_SHP\\_29TH\\_JAN\\_09-FINAL\\_FINAL.pdf](http://mdm.nic.in/mdm_website/Files/School%20Health%20Programme/Guidelines_SHP_29TH_JAN_09-FINAL_FINAL.pdf)>

<sup>iii</sup> Carol Bellamy, Former Executive Director of UNICEF

<sup>iv</sup> Government of India Expenditure Profile 2021-2022 <<https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/doc/eb/vol1.pdf>>