

Let Us March!

दुनिया भर के मेरे प्यारे बच्चों, Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, my dear daughter Malala, Excellencies, distinguished members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, dear brother Tom Harkin and my brothers and sisters

मैं आज शान्ति और नैतिकता के इस पवित्र मंच से वेद के मंत्र को उच्चारित करते हुए बहुत गौरान्वित हूँ।

इस मंत्र में एक ऐसी प्रार्थना, कामना और संकल्प निहित है जो सम्पूर्ण विश्व को मनुष्य निर्मित त्रासदियों से मुक्ति दिलाने का सामर्थ्य रखती है।

**संगच्छद्वम् संवदद्वम् संवो मनांसि जानताम्
देवा भागम् यथापूर्वे संजानानाम् उपासते!!**

हम सभी साथ-साथ चलें। वैश्विक विकास और तरक्की के रास्ते पर धरती के दक्षिणी छोर से उत्तर तक और पूर्व से पश्चिम तक कोई भी पिछड़ न जाए, हममें से कोई भी बिछुड़ न जाए।

हम सब साथ-साथ बोलें और साथ मिलकर चिंतन करें। अपने पूर्वजों से सीखते हुए साथ में मिल बैठ कर ऐसे ज्ञान का सृजन करें जो सभी के लिए कल्याणकारी हो।

आज मैं सबसे पहले अपने स्वर्गवासी माता-पिता को, स्वर्ग से भी महान् मेरी जन्मभूमि भारत माता को और धरती माता को नमन करता हूँ।

मैं उन हजारों बच्चों का स्मरण करता हूँ जिन्हें आज़ाद कराने में मैं स्वयं मुक्त होता रहा हूँ। मुक्ति की पहली मुस्कान से भरे उनके सुंदर चेहरों पर मैंने बार—बार, हर बार ईश्वर को मुस्कराते हुए देखा है।

मैं इस सम्मान का सबसे बड़ा श्रेय अपने आन्दोलन में भारत के कालू कुमार, धूमदास और आदर्श किशोर तथा पाकिस्तान के बालक इकबाल मसीह को देना चाहूंगा, जिन्होंने बच्चों की आजादी और गरिमा की रक्षा के लिए अपना सर्वोच्च बलिदान दे दिया। मैं यह पुरस्कार उन सभी शहीदों की ओर से, विश्व भर में बचपन को बचाने में जुटे कार्यकर्ताओं की ओर से, और मेरे समस्त देशवासी भाई बहनों की ओर से विनम्रतापूर्वक स्वीकार कर रहा हूँ।

भगवान बुद्ध, गुरुनानक और महात्मा गांधी की धरती भारत से नोर्वे तक की मेरी यह यात्रा धरती पर शान्ति और विश्व बन्धुत्व की प्राचीनतम् और वर्तमान धुरियों को जोड़ने वाली यात्रा है।

Friends, the Nobel Committee has generously invited me to deliver a “lecture.” Respectfully, I am unable to do that.

Because, I am representing here - the sound of silence. The cry of innocence. And, the face of invisibility. I represent the millions of children who are left behind and I have kept an empty chair here as a reminder. I have come here only to share the voices and dreams of our children - because they are *all* our children - [gesture to everyone in the audience],

I have looked into their frightened and exhausted eyes. I have held their injured bodies and felt their broken spirits.

Twenty years ago, in the foothills of the Himalayas, I met a small, skinny child labourer. He asked me: “Is the world so poor that it cannot give me a toy and a book, instead of forcing me to take a tool or a gun?”

I met with a Sudanese child-soldier who was kidnapped by an extremist militia. As his first training, he was forced to kill his friends and family. He asked me: “What is my fault?”

Twelve years ago, a child-mother from the streets of Colombia – trafficked, raped, enslaved – asked me this: “I have never had a dream. Can my child have one?”

All the great religions tell us to care for our children.

Jesus said: “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to them.”

The Holy Quran says: “Kill not your children because of poverty.”

Friends! There is no greater violence than to deny the dreams of our children.

Therefore...

I *refuse* to accept that all the temples and mosques and churches and prayer houses have no place for the dreams of our children.

I *refuse* to accept that world is so poor, when just one week of global military expenditure can bring all our children into classrooms.

I *refuse* to accept that all the laws and constitutions, and judges and police are not able to protect our children.

I *refuse* to accept that the shackles of slavery can ever be stronger than the quest for freedom.

I REFUSE TO ACCEPT.

My only aim is life is that every child is free to be a child,

- free to grow and develop,
- free to eat, sleep, see daylight,
- free to laugh and cry,
- free to play and learn,
- free to go to school, and above all,
- free to dream.

I have the privilege of working with many courageous people who have the same aim. We have never given up against any threat or attack and we will never.

We have made progress in the last couple of decades. We have reduced the number of out of school children by half. We have reduced the number of child labourers by a third. Child mortality and malnutrition has been reduced, and millions of child deaths have been prevented.

But, let us make no mistake, great challenges still remain.

Friends! The biggest crisis knocking on the doors of humanity today are fear and intolerance.

We have utterly failed in imparting an education to our children. An education that gives the meaning and objective of life. An education that builds a sense of global citizenship among the youth.

I am afraid that the day is not far when the cumulative result of this failure, will culminate in an unprecedented violence, that will be suicidal for humankind.

Rights, security and hope can only be restored through education.

Young people like Malala, Kayanat, Shazia and my daughters from Africa are rising up everywhere and choosing peace over violence, tolerance over extremism, and courage over fear.

The solutions are emerging. But, these solutions can not be found only in the deliberations in conferences, and the prescriptions from a distance.

They lie in small groups, local organisations and individuals, who confront the problem every day. Even if they remain unrecognised and unknown to the world

You may ask: what can one person do? Let me tell you a story I remember from my childhood: A terrible fire had broken out in the forest. All the animals were running away, including lion, the king of the forest.

Suddenly, the lion saw a tiny bird rushing towards the fire. He asked the bird, "what are you doing?" To the lion's surprise, the bird replied "I am on my way to extinguish the fire." He laughed and said, "how can you kill the fire with just one drop of water, in your beak?" The bird was adamant, and said, "*I am doing my bit.*"

Eighteen years ago, millions of my brothers and sisters, individuals marched across 80,000 kilometres, in 103 countries. And, a new

international law against child labour was born. We have done this.

We live in an age of rapid globalisation. We are connected through high-speed Internet. We exchange goods and services in a single global market. Each day, thousands of flights connect us to every corner of the globe.

But there is one serious disconnect. It is the lack of *compassion*.

What we need is a transformative compassion that leads to equality, freedom and justice.

Let us inculcate and transform this individuals' compassion into a global movement. Let us *globalise compassion*.

Mahatma Gandhi said, "If we are to teach real peace in this world... we shall have to begin with the *children*." I humbly add, let us unite the world through the compassion for *our* children.

Whose children are they who stitch footballs, yet have never played with one?

Whose children are they who harvest cocoa, yet do not know the taste of a chocolate?

Whose children are they who are dying of Ebola?

Whose children are they who are kidnapped and held hostage?

They are all *our* children.

I remember an eight-year-old girl we rescued from intergenerational forced labour in stone quarries. Sitting in my car immediately after her rescue she asked:

“Why didn’t you come earlier?”

Her angry question still shakes me – and has the power to shake the world. Her question is for all of us. What are we doing? What are we waiting for? How many girls will we allow to go without rescue?

Children are questioning our inaction and watching our actions.

We need *collective* actions with a sense of *urgency*.

Every single minute matters, *every* single child matters, *every* single childhood matters.

Therefore, I challenge the passivity and pessimism surrounding our children. I challenge this culture of silence, this culture of neutrality.

I call upon all the governments, intergovernmental agencies, businesses, faith leaders, workers, teachers and NGOs, and *each* one of us, to put an end to all forms of violence against children.

Slavery, trafficking, child marriages, child labour, sexual abuse, and illiteracy have no place in any civilised society.

Friends, we can do this.

Governments must make child friendly policies, and invest adequately in education and young people.

Businesses must be more responsible, accountable and open to innovative partnerships.

Intergovernmental agencies must work together to accelerate action.

Global civil society must rise above the business-as-usual and fragmented agendas.

Faith leaders and institutions, and all of us must stand with our children.

We *must* be bold, we *must* be ambitious, and we *must* have the will. We *must* keep our promises.

Over fifty years ago, on the first day of my school, I met a cobbler boy my age sitting outside school, polishing shoes. I asked my teachers: “*Why is he working outside? Why is he not with me in*

the school?" My teachers had no answer. One day, I gathered the courage to ask the boys' father. He said: *"Sir, I have never thought about it. We are just born to work."*

This made me angry. It still makes me angry. I challenged it then, and I am challenging it now.

As a child, I had a vision of tomorrow. A vision of that cobbler boy sitting with me in my classroom.

Now, that tomorrow has become TODAY.

I am TODAY, and you are TODAY. TODAY it is time for every child to have a right to life, right to freedom, right to health, right to education, safety, the right to dignity, right to equality, and right to peace.

TODAY, beyond the darkness, I see the smiling faces of our children in the blinking stars. TODAY, in every wave of every ocean, I see our children playing and dancing. TODAY, in every plant, tree, and mountain, I see our children growing in freedom.

I want *you* to see and feel this TODAY inside you.

My dear sisters and brothers, may I please request you to put your hand close to your heart - close your eyes and feel the child inside you?

I am sure you can - Now, listen to *this* child.

Today, I see thousands of Mahatma Gandhis, Martin Luther Kings, and Nelson Mandelas calling on us.

Let us democratise knowledge.

Let us universalise justice.

Together, *let us globalise compassion!*

I call upon you in this room, and all across the world.

I call for a march from exploitation to education, from poverty to shared prosperity, a march from slavery to liberty, and a march from violence to peace.

Asato mā sad gamaya, tamaso mā jyotir gamaya, mṛtyor mā amṛtaṁ gamaya.

Let us march from ignorance to awakening. Let us march from darkness to light. Let us march from mortality to divinity.

Let us march!