

## **Nurturing leadership among youth for global peace**

It is a privilege to address you today on the occasion of the second anniversary of the Salzburg Global Seminar Series on the subject of nurturing leadership among youth for global peace. The choice of this subject for the talk is most relevant and meaningful.

We are looking at a trinity of concepts or definitions here. One, leadership, the second youth, and the third, global peace. Not all these three co-exist in equal measure. The first, leadership is generally in short supply, globally. I mean leadership that encompasses all the definitions we have traditionally accorded to it, namely, vision, integrity, humanism, forbearance, and dynamism. Leaders come in all shapes and varieties, self-styled, and those who the people choose, often unthinkingly in terms of what the repercussions of such a choice may be. We are witness to this in the world around us. The second category – youth is never in short supply. There are about 1.2 billion young people between the ages of 15 and 24 in the world today. Young people are a sign that our world is replenishing itself, renewing its strength and vitality, they are a revalidation of human existence. But often, as a U.N. report said recently, they are not seen as the “missing peace”, as partners for peace. And then, we have the third, global peace – generally an elusive goal, a dream of the good we are capable of as human beings but fall short of achieving because of our human failures and our quest for power and influence. While traditionally peace is taken to mean the absence of war, or conflict, I associate it more with the words “Om, shanti” tying it to the sound of the universe itself where calm and bliss acquire a sublime transcendence or the Hebrew word “shalom” or peace which means to “be safe in mind, body or estate”, a sense of completeness or wholeness.

Bringing these three concepts or categories of leadership, youth and peace together then is the challenge we face. It is said that the young mind is an oceanic space, a tabula rasa, that is a repository that awaits unbiased knowledge and comprehensive awareness. That knowledge and awareness are vital, so that our youth can in turn begin to address themselves to the issues that require focus and attention in the world

around , on issues that concern the global future, our food and energy security, finance, open markets, the march of technology and artificial intelligence, and of course, the need for peace and the cessation of war, human displacement, and atmospheric pollution. For those of us who live in democracies, and an interconnected world, any sensitive mind will apprehend the manner in which a multiplicity of choices confront us, of the good, the bad and the ugly as we confront our futures. As barriers disappear, and the rules of the market and free trade sway the world, new nationalism and chauvinism also rear their heads, cosmopolitanism is in short supply, old identities and religious and ethnic fault lines reassert themselves.

Our ideals of leadership come to be defined in multitudinous ways, in this scenario. There is the image of the muscle-flexing, strong-armed leader who sets the tone in many countries today. That leader tends to hog the limelight, he is the focus of the media, his pictures are iconic representations that become etched in the minds of the impressionable as manifesting what a true leader should be like. He feeds into the xenophobia that is latent among most human beings, he trashes plurality and secularism, and upholds the power of force, and is rather scornful of the paths of peace and non-violence. Populism is the favored choice and the outsider is seen as truly alien, to be externalized, so that the so-called nationhood of a country is recovered. Respect for diversity is devalued. Where is that liberality of character, marked by self-discipline, obligation, civility, tolerance, fairness and generosity as Robert Nash once asked.

This is a new world that the youth of the day confront. Of course, in our own country where the youth in the age-group 15-29 years constitute 28 per cent of the population, the challenges are tremendous. The National Youth Policy of 2014 identified various target groups among this population. These are student youth, migrant youth, rural youth, tribal youth, youth at risk, youth in violent conflicts, school dropouts, groups with social or moral stigma and youth in institutional care. Young women, youth belonging to socially and economically disadvantaged communities and groups and differently abled youth form the three priority groups among the target age group. This entire population group

is what we call our demographic dividend, the largest youth population in the world , for whom adequate employment opportunities must be generated , failing which there will not only be economic costs to the country but also the social impact created by joblessness and the fall-out thereby. The question we must ask ourselves therefore is have we invested enough in our youth – in their education, their upliftment from poverty, their skill development and their health challenges? If we are to develop their leadership potential, it is essential that these primary needs be addressed with more and more urgency.

India is more than a microcosm of the world and therefore what happens in India, as the clock ticks on the future of its young population, affects the Indo-Pacific, Asia and the rest of the globe. Of course, India does not lack in talented, brilliant, and dynamic young leaders who express courage, tenacity, ambition, and resilience of the best variety in their fields of accomplishment. Our democracy is strong and stable and it has fostered young individuals of outstanding talent and acumen who will be able leaders of the future, both nationally and globally. But that does not mean our work is done. How do we foster leadership qualities in this cohort of great future potential? Leadership qualities that heal divisions, embrace diversity, bridge religious differences, avoid insularity and foster cosmopolitanism, that embrace transparency in governance, the best ideals of public service and the awareness that a single garment of destiny covers us all? They say when you are young, it is bliss to be alive in that dawn. As the poem goes, you are alive, you believe in the triumph of life, and if there is heaven anywhere you should bring it down to earth.

Global peace as a concept must enshrine respect for the rule of law, the peaceful settlement of disputes, the art of mature negotiation in a spirit of give-and-take, the rights of displaced peoples, minorities, migrants and refugees, the protection of women and children, and gender empowerment. The representation of women in politics, the academic and business world, and in gainful employment outside households, must increase for the feminization of the economy of daily life can only promote the goals of equity, sustainable development, peace and social

justice. The Global Peace Index ranks India and Pakistan among the most violent countries in the world and while we may dispute this inference which is based on internal disturbances, level of perceived criminality in society, number of jailed persons, number of violent demonstrations, access to small arms etc. , this is the image that then goes forth into the world and results in opinions being formed about our countries. I am tempted to ask, our peoples, the people of India and Pakistan live in countries that are sworn enemies of each other, we are in a state of perpetual tension and the threat of war, and we have lived for seventy years like this. If we can do anything together, can we at least weep together about these wasted years of violence, polarisation and mutual hatred, although our histories are one and our developmental challenges are related?

Are we giving our youth the space to explore dialogue with each other in these two countries? Or are we initiating them into belief in the narrative-gone-before – the narrative of a subcontinental Kurukshetra illuminated only by the threat of mutual annihilation ? Our electronic and digital media is primed to perpetuate this narrative, and saner, sober voices have no place in their daily offering of incitement to more hate, alienation and estrangement. War, as it has been said, is an easy and attractive narrative with quick but impermanent solutions. And then there is the risk of putting only economic growth as the sole guiding beacon in our quest for national greatness. Growth and prosperity are no doubt vital to the welfare of our millions, but what about the ‘dharma’ that Gandhiji spoke of, the moral and philosophical markers that build a great and inclusive social and democratic order for future generations? We must remember the goal of sarvodaya, or the benefit and well-being of all. There can be no quick fixes for this. We need a charter of compassion – compassionate, inclusive development that rises above sectarianism and caste and religious politics. And our youth should be a part of this mission.

Most of the world’s violent conflicts are fought within its young populations. Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nigeria suffered nearly 80 per cent of recent deaths from violent extremism, and at least half of the people who died were below the age of 22. These young

populations are also the recruiting ground for violent extremism, via the internet, social media and religious messengers.

What is the connection between youth and violence? Unemployment is a risk factor. The I.L.O. estimated that 2016, global youth unemployment rate was 13.1%; 37.7 percent of working youth are in extreme or moderate poverty; and 50.8 per cent of economically active youth are either unemployed or working but living in poverty. If youth are not included in economic, social and political life, and are unable to access opportunities for education and socio-economic mobility, the youth boom becomes a bulge, becomes more a threat than an asset. Those attracted to violent extremism are a few, and usually socioeconomic, cultural and political factors are critical in this process.

The United Nations Security Council adopted a landmark resolution in 2015 on Youth, Peace and Security with the unanimous support of all the 193 member states of the U.N. Resolution 2250 acknowledged that young people and youth-centric organizations are important partners in building and sustaining peace. This has been termed “a huge victory” for the young people of the world. In fact, youth organizations were the first to advocate for such a resolution. The world community has recognized the role that young people can play as advocates and actors for peace. There are five key pillars to the resolution. One calls for participation, the role that young people can play in the decision-making processes and in mediation. Secondly, the issue of protection. The resolution calls for the protection of young men and particularly women from sexual violence in conflict areas. The third is prevention – about creating an enabling socio-economic environment so that young people are given the opportunities to benefit from development and not lured into extremism for want of opportunities for economic betterment. The fourth is partnership. U.N. agencies have to see young people as a part of the solution and invest in them. The fifth is demobilization where young people are engaged as partners in demobilization and reconstruction. The language echoed that of another landmark resolution 1325 adopted in 2000 on Women, Peace and Security calling for the participation of more women in decision-making since the protection of women and girls in conflict is a major challenge prompting many countries to answer the call of the resolution

and craft their own national action plans for the involvement of women in addressing matters concerning peace and security. The call for the feminization of foreign policy also arises in a similar context. We need more young women in political governance, disarmament as well as international processes and negotiations.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has been quoted as saying that vague talk of peace “will only disturb pigeons”. He has stressed the need for more core, foundational values to build peace and reconciliation, a kind of “secular ethics” derived from “common experience and common sense” based on “common humanity”. He talks of a compassionate world built through education and not through prayer. And in his words, external disarmament “begins with internal disarmament”, in the cultivation of the “calm mind” which can provide the bedrock for peace-building. The calm mind also cultivates the practice of dialogue and bridge-building over differences and conflict, it practices the art of listening to the stories of victims of conflict and healing their trauma. And it promotes the habit of volunteerism, not for jihad or violent religious wars, but to make our society a better and safer place. It finds the true north on a moral compass constantly checking that compass to make sure it is not deviating from the true north and that there is a sense of purposeful direction towards making the world a better place. The World Economic Forum calls the moral compass as the “most overlooked leadership skill”. Our not-so-young leaders do not spend enough time discussing ethical dilemmas or questions of moral responsibility- if they did they could be such an inspirational source for the young segments of the population. In our own country, the fight against corruption has rightly received sharp focus, but who talks about the inculcation of ethical behavior from childhood. We rely on our traditions and our cultural identities to learn such values, but we need a steel structure on ethics that if ingrained deeply, can only make for great leadership and responsible citizenship.

Young people worldwide, see peace and security as more than just an absence of violence. They stress the importance of ending violence and also addressing its symptoms as well as examining the underlying causes of corruption, inequality and social injustice. Human rights protection

and redress are important to them. They speak about their desire to safeguard the planet and identify the risk of climate change as a progenitor of conflict impacting future generations. They are concerned about terrorism as well as the experience of forced migration. They acknowledge the divided nature of their own communities, including among peers, and understand that peace must be built horizontally across these divides, as well as vertically, between young people and the State. For most young people, peace is described as physical, structural and psychological, touching upon issues of belonging, dignity, hope and the absence of fear.

We keep saying youth are the leaders of tomorrow. Perhaps we do them injustice by saying so. They are the leaders of today. Therefore, their empowerment, involvement in public life, in the exercise of civic responsibility, in the holding of public office, in being paid attention to in national debates on our future as nations and the world is very vital. It is not enough to send our young to war at the touch of a button, they must have a say in the mitigation of the risks of war. And as for the young, educated population, they must feel the need to be more involved in tackling the problems that face our societies; as I heard said, in our new millennium, protest means writing something on Facebook or Twitter, or writing a blog post. What is keeping young people from being advocates of the golden rule of non-sectarian politics, why is it they tend to veer towards the extreme right or left – is it because we live in the age of the diminishing middle-path, where the golden mean is no longer burnished and no longer sought, where endless war and corruption have disillusioned the young and taken away their desire to build peace and assume leadership roles? The young could bring innovation, new ideas for the resolution of long-standing conflicts. One young man said recently that the role of young leaders is to innovate, to connect, to point out. That is a reminder to us older people that human nature is set, as E.M. Forster remarked, on a very large stage and that there are other voices in the garden, particularly those of the billion and more youth on this planet, that populate that stage with opinions and perspectives that deserve voice and hearing. In the words of the former U.N. Secretary General, Kofi

Annan, “a society that cuts itself off its youth severs its lifeline; it is condemned to bleed to death.”

I also heard a young woman speak at a seminar some time ago that she heard the word leadership for the first time when she was in high school – and also learnt about giving back to society, about the power of communication, and civic responsibility. She had a mentor who inspired her to be involved in serving the community, and our youth need such mentors to guide them. They should be taught the virtues of self-reliance and compassion, the power of resilience, clarity and confidence, and the values of inclusion and non-violent activism. These skills should be inculcated from childhood. That is the way to build a generation that becomes a partner of peace. The older generation has to get over their lack of trust of young people as responsible partners in building such peace. That is not the way to treat the 1.8 billion young people in the world today. They have to be given opportunities for public discourse. Teachers have to introduce young people to the ideas of non-violence and peace, cultivating skills like empathy, listening to the other, recognizing your own prejudices, and suspending judgement. Recent surveys suggest that the new generation of youth today value a culture of purpose, meaning that they place a premium on contributing to a goal beyond more immediate needs. International peace and security is such a goal.

The story of Malala Yousufzai tells us that a child’s voice can be heard across the world. And that a child can lead the way. Education, particularly secondary education is vital for peace, for development, for reconciliation that can transform our societies. 1.7 million school going children and over 40 per cent of Syrian refugee children have lost access to school owing to the ongoing conflict. While an education in science and technology is a passport to success for many of our youth, building strong citizenship must avoid narrow specializations to the exclusion of studying history, political science and the constitution so that the fundamental values of democracy are imbibed.

The use of social media in a digital age is replete with both possibilities and pitfalls, as we are all aware. Our youth are exposed to a tsunami of

information, often unverified and baseless and yet, believable. Violence and prejudice are fanned by this and our societies are yet to find their way to mitigate and prevent this from happening. As is being tried in some schools in Kerala, we need to sensitize children to the dangers of fake news and equip them better to seek truth only from facts and to get the advice of their mentors or teachers or parents when in doubt. At the same time, social media and communication technologies amplify voices, and foster connectivity and provide voice to the vulnerable. Access to the new technologies is therefore very vital as also the removal of the digital divide between those who have access to these new modes of access and those who do not.

The definition of youth, let me conclude is multi-faceted and heterogenous. Here you have heroes as well as villains, victims and perpetrators. This is not a fixed group. But to regard them as a problem is the wrong approach. Giving young people agency and not subjecting them to a polarizing and prejudiced discourse that regards them as either victims or villains is necessary. Understanding what has contributed to their role in violence or extremism is essential to charting the trajectory of peacebuilding and involving them as political actors in peacebuilding. Leadership, finally, is not a factor determined by age . We must consciously remove the barriers to recognizing that youth leadership has come to stay as a vital component in transforming our societies and making the world a place driven by positive change and peaceful reconciliation.