

Speech of Mr. P. Chidambaram:

Yohei Sasakawa San, Mr. Tarun Das, Vineeta, Ms. Imam and ladies and gentlemen.

Sasakawa San is a legend in his lifetime.

Some months ago, on another occasion, the then Vice President of India, Mr. Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, had an occasion to talk about the work of Mr. Sasakawa and his foundation. It's a foundation that is being established as an agent of change and through years of hard work and the passion that he brings to his work, he has been able to bring great change in many countries of the world.

The Nippon foundation is the parent the responds to many foundations in Japan, in Scandavia, and Great Britain, and today Mr. Sasakawa lends his great weight and wealth to establish Sasakawa India Leprosy Foundation. On behalf of the people of India, let me thank him for his generosity, passion and his commitment for eradication of leprosy.

Until some years ago, leprosy was thought to be incurable. Even today a number of people live under the misapprehension that leprosy is incurable,

in the sense that they think that leprosy can be a resident but once the body affected by leprosy, the person remains a 'LEPAR' which in many Indian languages is more or less equal to the word **untouchable**. Those of you who can in your mind translate the word 'LEPAR' into an Indian language will know what I am talking about.

We know and those who do not know should know, that leprosy is indeed curable after multi drug therapy was instituted and especially after 1960 when the two wonder drugs Rifampicin and Clofazimine introduced made leprosy perfectly curable. Millions and millions of people have been cured of the disease since then. As recently in 1981 they were 57 cases of Leprosy, today it has come down 0.72 per ten thousand now, less than 1. 28 states and union territories have achieved the level of elimination that is less than 1 per ten thousand. When we say 28 states and union territories have eliminated, we also have to acknowledge the 6 states and union territories have a prevalence rate between 1 and 2 per ten thousand. There is no state where the prevalence rate is more than 2 per ten thousand. These 6 states and union territories are Bihar, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Delhi and Chandigarh. Now one can understand, perhaps find the explanation why Bihar, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand continue to have a prevalence rate of between 1 and 2 which can be attributed to the overall economical and social background of those states. Why should

Bengal have a prevalence rate more than the national average? And why should India's most prosperous cities, Delhi and Chandigarh, have a higher prevalence rate?

Today, many efforts are being made to eliminate leprosy and I am confident that we can eliminate leprosy. The National Leprosy Eradication Programme (NLEP) has been one of our most successful programmes and I am sure with more committed workers, more partnerships with NGO'S we will able to bring the prevalence rate in these 6 states and union territories to go down and eventually eliminate leprosy in India.

It is important that we detect leprosy at an early stage. Leprosy has a long incubation period, about 5 years and sometimes it takes 20 years for the symptoms to be visible, which means that leprosy needs detection on time, and for this very reason we must sharpen the tools of detection.

I will tell you why - The kind of stigma that is practised in leprosy is because of the deformity. If deformity is not there then the stigma can be removed. Unfortunately most leprosy affected patients are left with some deformity usually of the fingers or the toes and that deformity is unfortunately irreversible. This disease is curable, and anyone who has

been affected can be cured, but once deformity sets in, then it is more or less irreversible, and this is what sets apart the person affected by the leprosy from the rest of the humanity and hence the stigma continues. If leprosy is detected at early stage we know that it is possible to avoid deformity of any kind.

The speech of Mr.Sasakawa is full of deep passion on the subject and the passion with which he has visited India 20 times in 3 years I wonder how many times he visits Japan. But there is such devotion, and such life long commitment which has made Sasakawa San a legend in his lifetime. Let me once again thank him for his generosity. The government will extend whatever help is required to Sasakawa India Leprosy Foundation.

Thank You