

Address at the Inaugural Session

H.E. Mr. N.T. Shanmugam,

Minister of State for Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, New Delhi,

Your Excellency, Mr. Shyamal Kumar Sen, Governor of West Bengal; Distinguished Delegates; Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am extremely happy that WHO has convened the South-East Asia Public Health Conference in India. It is most gratifying that the Conference is being hosted in Calcutta, where India's oldest public health institution is based. I extend a warm welcome to all of the delegates.

When India achieved independence, its health situation was extremely dismal. However, considerable progress has been made in the past five decades, which is reflected in the various health indicators. Furthermore, polio has almost been eliminated. Small pox has been eradicated, and no case of guinea worm has been reported since 1996. When we compare the crude birth rate life expectancy with the infant mortality rate to those statistics of 1947, the improvement in public health is quite evident. Significant indigenous capabilities have been developed for production of drugs, vaccines, and equipment.

Our successes include the introduction of iodized salt, Vitamin A in oil, and iron fortified tablets in certain areas. The increased provision of safe water, in both urban and rural areas has also considerably reduced the incidence of diarrhea disease. Support for construction of latrines in rural areas has resulted in increased environmental sanitation. However, I acknowledge that many miles must be traversed before the ideal can be realized.

India is, today, grappling with the burden of communicable diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, viral hepatitis, CLT, and cholera. We are also assaulted with non-communicable diseases, like cardiac disorders, diabetes, hypertension, strokes, and mental disorders; all are the result of pollution, sedentary lifestyles, and diets with

refined foods. Currently, outbreaks of *Kala Azar*, viral hepatitis, and dengue fever are being reported with alarming frequency.

In our modern society, technology and rapid transport have converted the world into a global village. I represent a region where one fourth of the world's people live. Although we have a high population growth, we have very strong cultural bonds. We have been fortunate to develop strong alliances with our neighbors in Southeast Asia who have evolved strategies for controlling malaria, synchronized immunization schedules, and shared technical knowledge. We need to move toward a similar cooperation to develop an equitable world health order. We need to develop a global mechanism for promoting the health status and predicting the spread of contagious diseases. I appeal for health to be viewed as a responsibility that must be shouldered by the entire society. WHO has succeeded in developing human resources and in establishing laboratory norms and standards for food, drugs, and nutrition. This role must be strengthened and diversified so that developing countries can evolve effective, sustainable strategies for their specific needs, their ethics, and the interests of the poor and the needy.

I am thankful for the opportunity to address this gathering on a few important topics, and that the Calcutta conference will be a launching pad for WHO supporters, resulting in SEARO action for providing quality public health. I wish great success to the conference and hope that you enjoy your stay in Calcutta.

Thank you.