

Address at the Session on Calcutta Declaration

Mr. Jyoti Basu,

Honorable Chief Minister of West Bengal, India

Distinguished persons on the dais, ladies and gentlemen,

I am happy to be present here today at this Regional Conference on Public Health in the 21st Century. We are grateful to the World Health Organization for choosing Calcutta as the venue for the Conference involving all the countries of South-East Asia. It is important to bear in mind that Calcutta is the home of the oldest public health institution in the country - the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health.

I welcome the representatives from various countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Myanmar, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Indonesia, Bhutan, Thailand and India. I also welcome the notable experts from all over the world, representatives from the United Nations agencies and other participants representing various organizations.

I feel that good public health practices should be the mainstay of all national and state efforts. These endeavours help in developing a better quality of life for the people, especially the underprivileged, the vulnerable and disadvantaged, and the marginalized sections who unfortunately comprise nearly 60% of the total population in our country. Socio-economic and other developments are based on public health issues like provision of safe water, environmental sanitation, prevention and control of communicable and other infectious diseases, prevention of nutritional deficiencies, and so on. Our efforts must be directed to involve the people in the public welfare programmes that we adopt and implement.

My attention has been drawn to the 'Declaration on Health Development in the South East Asia Region in the 21st Century' prepared by the Health Ministers of the Member Countries of this region.

The principles they adopted include faith in basic human rights, equity and social justice, gender equity, health for sustainable development and well-being. All these issues constitute a common concern of all governments. The emphasis on the inter-relationship between poverty and ill-health is well established; therefore, our commitment to address the health needs of the poor with whatever available resources is most critical. The economies of the various countries in the region needs to be substantially altered to meet the health needs of the disadvantaged and poor sections. Only then can the goals set out in the Declaration be reached in the 21st Century.

In West Bengal, through our *Panchayat Raj* institutions (local bodies in the countryside), we have been constantly trying to follow a holistic approach for attaining better quality of life for the disadvantaged sections of the population and, especially, women.

I would like to mention that we have been able to decentralize a very broad range of facilities, funds, and activities through our three-tier *Panchayat* infrastructure right to the grass-root level. I do hope that in the coming days, our initiatives will be directed to take further advantage of this system for implementing many more programmes. We have also tried to change the health seeking behaviour of the community by providing the health related information and education to all elected *Panchayat* functionaries and also by making the activities of all Primary Health Centres and sub-centres linked to local *Panchayats* and *Panchayat Samitis*.

We are aware that there are daunting challenges confronting us in the health scenario owing to a number of factors, which include rapid rate of population growth, unrestrained

development leading to environmental pollution, outbreak of new and re-emerging diseases, an appalling number of under-nourished women and children, and illiteracy, among others.

Our experience teaches us that the Government alone is not in a position to take the responsibility of combating these mounting challenges. Efforts by the Government need to be supplemented by the endeavours of the private sector, industrial houses, voluntary and non-governmental organizations, and also by the people themselves.

I welcome the announcement of the "Calcutta Declaration," which aims at setting the trend to plan more intensive and committed efforts in the next Century for our future generations. On behalf of the Government of West Bengal and on my own behalf, I assure you of all help, assistance and co-operation in implementing the programmes indicated in the Declaration. I hold that public health should be given the top priority. Our elected three-tier *Panchayat* system, which has drawn international attention, is equipped to take up more challenges at the local level, and our

Health Department with its existing infra-structure can plan strategic interventions with the guidance and support of organizations like WHO and other related bodies.

Our focus should not be confined to hospitals and nursing homes, which are mostly based on curative care. In order to substantially reduce the burden of health related expenses and other pressures, we must emphasize preventive and promotive approaches and invest in these more than ever.

I once again thank the WHO South-East Asia Regional Office for organizing this Conference in Calcutta and welcome the Calcutta Declaration. I also thank the local organizers from the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health.

I hope that our guests from foreign countries have found their stay in Calcutta enjoyable and fruitful. All of us should take serious note of the outcome of this Conference and the guidelines adopted by it will go a long way in the years ahead to solve a number of crucial public health related problems, improving quality of life for all.