

## **END POVERTY. FEED HUNGER**

Today St. Thomas' College is celebrating "United Nations Day 2012".

The United Nations Organisation (UNO) is indeed one of the World's noblest creations. After two terrible World Wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, world leaders realized that an institutionalized mechanism was required to forewarn of potential conflicts or manage them when they erupt.

The UN is the principal global forum that brings together as equal members, every one of the 193 nations of the World. It has developed into an organization that handles all major problems confronting our world, through its numerous agencies specializing in specific subjects and its regulatory mechanisms, as well as dialogues and conferences.

The UN has played a monumental role in managing multifarious issues between States and alleviating conflict. It has also achieved many successes in resolving the problems of poverty and deprivation, while promoting progress and prosperity of Nations.

We hope that it will attain its full potential to become the place where the voice of the poor, the defenceless and the weak is given due importance, as much as the voice of the rich and powerful.

Permit me gentlemen, now, to speak briefly of St Thomas' College. It is one of Sri Lanka's pioneering institutions of education. This school has made an invaluable and lasting contribution to the enlightenment of our youth, not only in the field of letters but also towards their spiritual and moral upliftment.

St Thomas' College commenced its long journey of service more than 160 years ago. It has produced leaders of great quality for our Nation, leaders in every field – religion, politics, civil society and so on.

I would say that the most remarkable achievement of this college is :-

- to teach its pupils that education is not only about learning of books and acquisition of knowledge, but equally importantly, that it is about the acquisition of moral systems, ethical values that would distinguish a cultured Man from a barbarian.

These values were honesty and integrity; loyalty and sincerity; commitment to country, school and one's beliefs; and the courage to stand up for them, in the face of all challenges; dedicated service to the Nation, one's workplace, school, friends.

Since Man began to enunciate his thoughts in the form of various philosophies, several millennia ago, the belief common to all enlightened thought was that an integral part of human education was the acquisition of certain basic moral qualities that are eternal, remaining unchanged through the ages.

Education was incomplete without this.

Those value systems elevated the spirit of Man to levels that permitted him to reach the zenith of creativity in every sphere – in Science and Technology, in the Arts and so on. Let me not pass over an important fact, one that binds me closely to this school. My father as his father before him and many other close relatives received their education at St. Thomas' College. This makes me feel, I have a close bond with this school and with all of you, especially because you fashioned my father into a man I admire very much – a man of great intellect, integrity, honesty and immense courage.

Thank you, St. Thomas' for the great service you have rendered to build generations of decent young men.

- Freedom, is one of the several eternal values cherished by Humans. Democracy is founded on the belief in Freedom. Many are the battles and wars fought in the name of Freedom.

Freedom is composed of the right to think freely, to talk and express one's thoughts freely, to practice one's beliefs – religious or political freely, to have free access to Justice and the Law. It also implies respect for the freedom of the "other".

I am deeply disturbed to find that a considerable number of people talk about their rights, while refusing steadfastly to accept that the "others" have rights too. They seem to believe that their rights must be guaranteed at the expense of the rights of others.

We do not realize the one obvious truth that our Freedom becomes a full and lasting one, only when the Freedom and Rights of others are secured.

If this is not so, the "others" will rise up and fight for their due and by that very act hamper and negate our Freedom.

When we let respect for Freedom and Democratic Governance disappear, we will have laid the foundation for autocracy and dictatorship.

What do we see today? A massive change has taken place over millennia, in the systems of values that have underpinned the greatness, the nobility of Man. One single word has replaced all this – Profit. Material wealth, monetary considerations seem to outweigh all humane values. Political power is an important component of the equation of profit making, as it confers the authority to make money, no matter how and by what means. We live in a country where the naked demonstration of the abuse of power, the shameless indulgence in corruption and nepotism, the violation of Human Rights and the Rule of Law have become the order of the day.

Today I do not plan to analyse the genesis and causes for this situation. Permit me, however, to briefly state that I believe that the sudden and accelerated onslaught of the free-market economy, the capitalist system dumped upon the existing ancient, rural and feudal socio-economic, cultural structures, sent shock waves which could not be absorbed soon enough by

the existing systems. The traditional societies where caring for each other among equals as well as between the elites and those who served them was burst asunder , without a credible, acceptable set of social practices to replace it. Relations between parents and children, teachers and pupils, the rulers and the ruled, even among peers is no more regulated according to accepted sets of norms. Each one does what he wishes, regardless of how much harm, hurt and pain may be caused to others and worse - to the Nation, to our country.

The absolutist powers bestowed on the Executive Presidency and the abrogation of the 17<sup>th</sup> amendment to the Constitution have no doubt compounded the situation.

I say all this, to emphatically underscore the responsibilities that fall upon religious leaders and educational institutions. In this context, your responsibility is a sacred one.

You have the incredible privilege of moulding the minds and thereby the lives of young people who study in your schools. It is important to teach them Languages, Maths, Science and Techonology, History, Geography and so on. It is equally important to teach them the value of Freedom and Human Rights and inculcate respect for the rights of others to cherish and respect difference and diversity.

When my government first assumed office, we were deeply aware that we inherited a fractured Nation. The Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights were badly violated.

We implemented many programmes to reestablish democratic governance, independence of the judiciary, transparency in government dealings and so on. First and foremost I realized that all this will not have much effect, unless our people learned to respect the values that underpin good governance. We decided to begin with our children. We formulated a comprehensive education reforms programme.

I created a Presidential Task Force on Education, involving leaders from the public sector, business, academics and professionals. The programme was implemented with great success, during the period from 1998 to 2005. Teaching materials, substance, methods were modernized, a massive development of infrastructure – mainly laboratory, library and teaching facilities was accomplished. New subjects to promote equality, coexistence and harmony among children of all communities were introduced under the Peace Education Programme. Teachers – salaries were increased by 300% in six years and 500% by the end of my Presidency.

The community of teachers and parents still bear witness to the success of this programme.

I don't wish to speak of the present situation. May I suggest that even the private schools adopt a policy of actively teaching ethics, moral value and respect for Freedom and Human Rights and stand firmly and courageously behind it. For this the school authorities would need the active support of parents and past pupils, to fend off challenges from political goons.

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Now at last, I shall come to the topic assigned to me “End Poverty. Feed Hunger”.

Poverty is considered to be the greatest challenge facing all countries. Governments have formulated and implemented thousands of programmes to alleviate or end poverty and deprivation.

Economic development is no doubt the priority requirement for addressing the challenge of poverty. Poverty poses an economic as well as a political and moral problem. It constitutes loss of economic potential by the nation and causes frustration and anger among the deprived, leading to severe political unrest, armed conflict and even terrorism - that most dehumanizing phenomenon of our times. Political conflict is then followed invariably by economic regression and political instability. Morally poverty is an outrage.

There are a few ways to define poverty.

- By levels of income and expenditure
- or Poverty that causes income disparity and inequality
- or as Prof Amartya Sen the Noble Prize winning economist, from our region, defines poverty based on opportunities offered to citizens.

Most South Asian economies have attained accelerated growth and development in the past few decades. However, hundreds of millions of our citizens have been left behind, continuing to live under conditions of extreme poverty and are even becoming poorer than before. They remain marginalized, while the benefits of economic growth are enjoyed by a relatively small number of the privileged classes.

The largest number of poor - 600 million people live in South Asia. Although we see significant progress in poverty reduction in Asia, particularly in China and East Asia, South Asia has yet much to achieve in this sphere. India has achieved massive economic progress in the last 15 years. However, it is estimated 200 million people still live below the poverty line there and are becoming poorer. There are also pockets of acute poverty and increasing inequalities in all our countries, especially those affected by conflict.

We can deduce from this that economic development is only one part of the solution. We need to adopt a holistic plan of action that also encompasses the socio-political aspects of the problem.

Every citizen of all communities of race, religion, caste, political beliefs, must have equal opportunities to access the benefits of development. In formulating development policies, an inclusive approach is required so that all marginalized groups in a nation are included as equal partners in the developmental process – from the planning stages to implementation.

Recent studies in “Horizontal Inequalities” demonstrate that inequalities lead to conflict as well as economic regression.

Perceived injustice as well as frustration and despair caused by continued social marginalization, economic deprivation and political defeat has been known to result in violence. It has been said that “young hope betrayed, transforms itself into bombs”.

I wish to affirm here that marginalized groups have been found to perceive injustice not only as economic deprivation, but also through the prism of social and political inequality. The exclusion of some communities from an equitable share of the benefits of prosperity causes inequalities in every sphere. It has been affirmed that Poverty, Social and Political injustice and their relationship to conflict may be measured by the difference in opportunity structures for the excluded groups.

Hence, the most urgent challenge with regard to feeding hunger, ending poverty and deprivation is to eliminate poverty while undertaking equitable development that would include all sectors of society as equal partners in the process of governance.

Studies have clearly ascertained that when all communities living within a State are guaranteed equal rights – economically, socially, politically and their separate identities are respected and given free expression, they will become a productive, vibrant part of the State, celebrating the richness of its diversity, while building an united, strong and stable country.

Such a society is called a Cohesive or Shared or Inclusive Society.

It is a society where the political, governmental and societal structures are designed to allow the equitable distribution of and equal access to the benefits of development and prosperity for All, irrespective of the community to which they belong. The Constitution of the State, its political structures such as Parliament and other elected bodies and government and administrative structures will all have to be constructed in a manner as to accommodate free and active participation of All, in political and governmental processes, as well as the guarantee of equal rights to all.

The contrary instance is where differences among diverse communities living within a country have been exacerbated by rulers, to their advantage. They tend to conjure up “an enemy” from peoples who belong to different ethnic, religious, caste or political groups. History is replete with examples of States and Governments employing the concept of the “other”, represented as the “enemy”, as a tool of Government management. For a large part of human history the “enemy” has helped forge national unity, as well as entrench weak rulers and Governments in power. Governments whip up hatred against the “other” by maintaining the myth of the dichotomy between “us” and “them”. This requires the oppression of the other and the denial of their rights. Such exclusion takes place not only through outright hostility but also through neglect of minority groups.

Sustainable development, prosperity and peace necessarily imply that the “other” be brought in and included fully and honestly into the processes of economic development, as full and equal partners of the process of government – to power sharing, for instance.

To end poverty and hunger in a durable manner, we need inclusive and sustainable development.

Here I wish to quote from the great Son of Bharat – Rabindranath Tagore – “Bigotry tries to keep Truth safe in its hands, with a grip that kills it”.

In conclusion, I would like to extend my sincere good wishes to St Thomas’ College for continued success in its noble endeavours. May you be blessed with the wisdom and strength to fashion the young boys who pass through your portals, into a new generation of young men of learning, integrity and honesty to lead our Nation to progress and peace and the greatness we so richly deserve.