



Dr. Justice Dhananjaya Chandrachud
Chief Justice of India
Chief Guest - 2023

Good evening and Namaskar the Bajaj family, Mr. Shekhar Bajaj, Mr. Madhur Bajaj, Ms. Minal Bajaj, Mr. Kailash Satyarthi, Dr. R A Mashelkar, Dr. Anil Kakodkar and all the distinguished awardees. Dr. Lalitha Regi and Dr. Regi George, Dr. Ramalakshmi Datta, Sudha Varghese, Mr. Raha Naba Kumar and all the dignitaries present here.

75 years ago, several nations across the world joined India in being freed of the colonial yoke, so many of these nations have fallen by the side. They attained independence, but they were unable to attain true self-governance. India is unique because we have been able to sustain democracy. What is it that sets India apart from so many nations across the world, which became free with us around the same time, but were not able to sustain freedom as a way of life? Some may possibly say that we internalize democracy, that we have internalized constitutional values. At the birth of the constitution Dr. Bhabha Sahib Bhimrao Ambedkar, whose statue we put up in the Supreme Court just on Constitution and day this year, said, will the Constitution survive with India as a nation survive, because there was a grave doubt at the birth of the Constitution as to whether the nation would survive because this was a nation which was born out of conflict, a nation which saw the first travails of conflict in the partition that preceded Independence India, and then continued beyond.

So, some will say that we internalize democracy. Others will say that, well, the strength of our nation lies in its pluralistic culture, the culture of inclusion, the culture of all-encompassing humanity. Yet others will say that it's the culture of reasoned dialog. What is being called as the argumentative Indian in our ability to be argumentative, in our ability to speak to each other.

We have ensured that, whereas in many other nations, the power of violence and the power of, if I may say so, the power of the gun has got the better of the rule of law. India has survived through all the tough times because of this ability for us to engage in dialog. But today's evening tells us that there's something far more profound which is really happening, and which all the awardees this evening are symbols of, are emblems of and that I believe, is a uniquely Indian trait which each of these awardees and when I say Indian, I mean the subcontinent, I mean Bangladesh as well.

The truly unique trait which we as members of the Global South and particularly of this society represent, of allowing the submergence of the self, of allowing the submergence of the identity of the self into the infinity. What do we mean by infinity? The science will give us a different description of infinity. Human beings have a different definition of infinity. Men and women of religion give us a different view of infinity. But infinity really is that we submerge our own sense of ego, our own sense of existence in being of service to others. And when we are of service to others, very often we are of service to others and those others are truly people we may or may not ever know or even come into contact with as personal friends. Of course, many of the awardees have worked within the communities and know those communities, but it is this ability which is so true, unique to our culture, namely the ability to allow yourself to recede into the background and to allow it to be overcome by one unique and overpowering

commitment to do good to others who are less fortunate than you, which truly marks us out as a civilization.

You would have found that each of the awardees has touched lives beyond their own communities. Each of them have travelled out of the familiar. They have worked at grave peril to their own existence, as Sudha Varghese said, she said, I've lived a thousand deaths and I have lived a thousand lives. So, it's this sense of fearlessness, namely, that did not effort to do good and to be of good to the marginalized, that each of these awardees has the ability in themselves to face up, to danger, and to not allow that danger to overcome your own existence because there's a higher purpose of human life.

And what better way to commemorate that sense of purpose than these awards which have been instituted by the Jammalal Bajaj Foundation. The Jammalal Bajaj Foundation, which was founded in 1977, is, to my mind, a living testament of the enduring legacy of its founder, an icon celebrated for his humanitarianism, philanthropy and unwavering commitment to social reform rooted in the ideals he held dear, and the Gandhian ideology fervently pursued.

This foundation has proven to perpetuate his vision. Frankly, I've grown up as a young child, as a college going lad. I used to devour the newspapers, and anybody who devours the newspapers knows that these foundational awards annually are really national commemorative ideals for people who have truly espoused the cause of India. And I think I'm truly honoured and thank you very much for those very warm words said about me.

But I'm truly honoured and privileged to be a part of this event because this is an event which I have looked at from the margins, whether it was traveling in the Delhi Transport Corporation bus as a young college going lad or in the libraries of St. Stephens College. The Jammalal Bajaj Awards, an initiative by the foundation, serves as a profound tribute to individuals who dedicate their lives to the service of others, a heart filled homage to the enduring legacy of Jammalal Bajajji.

This year's celebration holds an additional layer of significance as we commemorate the centenary birth anniversary of the foundations Founder, Ramkrishna Bajaj, thereby further enriching the spirit of our gathering. Public service holds a paramount importance in the fabric of a thriving society. The state, at a certain level, has a constitutional duty to enhance the well-being of its citizens along the lines of equality, justice and fairness, but what sets apart our society are two words in the preamble to our constitution, fraternity and dignity. People of exemplary character have also taken upon themselves to improve and contribute towards social and economic development. They do so not because such a duty is cast on them by the Constitution or a body of higher law. They do so on their own willingness and volition because they see the advantages of engaging in public service, advantages which go beyond their own existence.

It fosters a sense of community and shared responsive polity, creating a social ecosystem where individuals actively contribute towards collective welfare. But beyond that, it also contributes to a feeling of satisfaction and fulfilment and aids in reassessing the very purpose of our own lives. Despite its intrinsic value, very few individuals embrace public service wholeheartedly. Due to the challenges and barriers that they encounter on the path, choosing a public service path often requires personal and professional sacrifice. Individuals may find themselves navigating a delicate balance with the demands of public duty, clash with the needs of personal and career pursuits. They may encounter resistance in opposition as their actions may challenge established norms, but that is exactly what each of the lives of the awardees towards our society reminds us in the face of these formidable challenges the importance of public service cannot be overstated for community development and growth.

Whether it was Nelson Mandela in the anti-apartheid regime or closer to home Jyotirao Phule's father, expelled Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai from his home, unable to bear the pressure from communities to shut the school started by the couple which catered to women from backward castes, those who were marginalized, both on accounts of caste and gender, the public through mud, dirt and stones that Savitribai Phule when she was on her way to the school. Their struggles highlight the complexities individuals face with the urge to contribute to the betterment of society clashes with established social norms. Between the 1980s and the 1990s we saw the growth of new liberal democracies across the world. The growth of neo liberal democracy coincided with the growth of free markets and free trade. The growth in GDP is in the developed world, but that was not backed by a true devolution of prosperity, education and enlightenment to the communities even in the developed world.

Much of the polarization which we see today across the globalized world, the plural, the polarization between the right and the left and the center, the polarization which we experience across the world and India is no exception, is also marked by the growth of social media the sense of intolerance among communities, the short attention spans with the younger generation has.

But truly this is not just an isolated phenomenon, which is a product of, say, free markets and technology. There is something more profound which is going on and something more profound which is going on is this, it's in the ability of our societies to not realize at a given point of time the true worth of self-sacrifice in pursuit of a wider communal goal of a wider community, goal of enabling those who are at the margins of our society to realize a better future for themselves.

Every day in my life as a judge, I come face to face with injustice. A blind Dalit girl, raped by a person who was a neighbour. A woman who has been sexually harassed by persons whom she trusted within the home. Each day of our lives as judges, we see injustice face to face, and while we try and resolve injustice within the boundaries of the law, we also realize the limitations of the law in creating a truly just society. The importance of the law lies in its ability to create a framework where there is an organized discourse possible and as I said, where we replace the power of the bullet with the power of reason. But equally, there is justice beyond law and for justice beyond law, we need to fathom our own hearts, our own communities, to tap the innate goodness in individuals.

Because the law can be a source of immense good, but the law can be a source of immense arbitrariness, it depends on who reads the law and what are the social conditions in which the law is wielded. That is why India has a penal code of 1860, which we still apply today. But the same penal code of 1860 has assumed a more humanistic tradition based on the society in which that law is continually evolving. So, it is important for us when we come face to face with injustice, not to look it up as just another passing phase. Because if we were not to deal with injustice with a certain degree of firmness and resolve, there is a grave danger that it will envelop and perhaps submerge our societies.

Drawing a parallel to our distinguished recipients tonight, let me say a few words about them before I conclude. Dr. Regi George and Dr. Lalitha Regi, Trustees of the Tribal Health Initiative in Tamil Nadu. We witness a modern manifestation of all these principles that we have spoken out through this evening. Much like so many others who have, preceded this great tradition their commitment led them to Sittilingi valley, a remote tribal area in Dharmapuri district 125 kilometres away from Salem. The Tribal Health Initiative, born in 1993, in a modest hut, has been providing medical services to the tribals in Sittilingi ever since. Their service has dramatically improved the health conditions of the inhabitants of the village where the infant mortality rate has reduced, and the nutritional levels of children have improved.

I wish to highlight the remarkable work of Sudha Varghese in the category of Development and Welfare of Women and Children. Her commitment to fostering self-reliance within Musahar's scheduled castes community, particularly among adolescent girls stands as a beacon of a transformative impact through innovation and innovative initiatives like Prerna Schools and alternative education centers. Mrs. Varghese not only imparts literacy but equips individuals with essential tools for empowerment. Her dedication extends beyond education to encompass skill training, agricultural programs, and challenging traditional gender norms.

Her NGO Nari Gunjan has played a pivotal role in educating over 40,000 children and fostering women's empowerment. Groundbreaking initiatives like Sargam band and support for the first woman autorickshaw driver in the region underscore her commitment to breaking barriers and promoting inclusiveness. Ms. Varghese I thought that one of my contributions to our society was the entry of women in the armed forces. The first woman air force pilots' women in the high seas, women in the bunkers on the borders. But truly, I am humbled by the initiative to bring the first woman auto driver, this shows your commitment to breaking barriers and nothing can break barriers than telling the community that you have someone in your midst who is a woman who is breaking those gendered stereotypes.

Ms. Varghese is effort to impart and make women self-reliant, is markedly improved the living conditions of women who face disadvantages, both on account of their gender and caste. One of the issues which has plagued our society is the lack of opportunities in the rural landscape. The urban rural divide is stark and is deeply demarcated on the lines of caste, class and gender.

Nearly 60% of India's population resides in rural areas, but their needs are seldom resolved at an institutional level. So, while on the one hand we are giving birth to super specialty hospitals, we don't care about primary health care. Their needs are seldom resolved at an institutional level. Reformation at the rural level requires a multi-fold approach, with a focus on social reformation, creating job opportunities to improve their purchasing power and enhancing their understanding of civic rights.

Additionally, fostering entrepreneurship at the grassroots level can play a pivotal role rural development by encouraging local industries, supporting small scale enterprises, providing training in sustainable agricultural practices contributes to economic growth and self-sufficiency. This brings our attention to Dr. Datta that tonight's esteemed recipient of the award for the Application of Science and Technology for Rural Development, Dr. Datta has pioneered technology, generation adoption and diffusion for women in the Sundarbans.

Her groundbreaking initiatives, such as growing plants and site cyclones bottles, have reached 17,000 people across 273 villages, fostering better livelihoods and empowerment through her modern lab and community-based programs. Dr. Datta aims to bridge social barriers and enhance community well-being. In the remarkable stories of Dr. Datta and the unsung people she helps we find inspiration to redefine services and equitable responsibility.

I would also like to highlight the global impact of public service as demonstrated by Mr. Raha Naba Kumar's endeavours outside India in Bangladesh. 76 non-formal primary schools, he has revived the school, inaugurated by Mahatma Gandhi, facilitated the installation of deep hand tubers and low-cost toilets, and resolved numerous cases relating to human rights and justice. The Gandhi Ashram Trust has helped result about 28,000 cases related to domestic violence, community litigations, communal instability and other forms of violence that affect the peace and harmony in society.

People first approached the trust before taking any legal action. His establishment of the Gandhi Memorial Museum stands as a testament to his commitment. These individual acts of service collectively contribute to building a more equitable and compassionate society. These stories depict the transformative power of kindness and compassion in bringing real change at the level of the grassroots. It is imperative for us never to lose sight of the difference between justice and charity. Justice, by its nature, aims to tackle the root causes of problems. When we talk about justice, it involves addressing the underlying systemic issues that lead to inequality, discrimination, or marginalization within communities. It seeks to create systemic changes that empower communities, ensuring that they have access to resources, opportunities and rights. For instance, advocating for fair policies, fighting against discrimination and promoting equal access to education and employment are all ways to pursue justice.

On the other hand, charity tends to focus on providing immediate relief for aid to alleviate the symptoms or consequences of those problems. While charity is vital in offering immediate help and support to those in need, such as providing food, shelter, health care and emergency assistance, it often does not address the systemic reasons behind why these issues exist in the first place.

Now, I do believe that the true worth of the work of these awardees is to traverse a life beyond charity, into a life dedicated to the quest for justice. Committing ourselves to justice involves touching lives profoundly and creating enduring change through our everyday interactions. While commendable charitable actions serve as a temporary solution. The awardees today have all contributed to the remarkable work to the pursuit of justice by identifying the systemic failures and tackling them through innovation, compassion and assistance.

In conclusion, as we celebrate the Jamnalal Bajaj awards today, it is crucial to acknowledge that the challenges that we confront today must push us to innovate and collaborate for a more just and compassionate society. These challenges encompass systemic issues like socioeconomic disparity, environmental degradation and societal prejudices, beckoning us to channel our efforts to bring about positive and collaborative change.

Let this exploration serve as a resounding call to action. Let us weave together the threads of justice and fairness, not merely as words spoken, but as inspirations, fulfilling and fuelling our actions that made this ceremony ignite the spark in each of us to script a life of justice and selflessness into the fabric of our inclusive societies tapestry.

Thank you all and may our collective endeavours continue to illuminate the path towards a more just, equitable and compassionate world for the generations to come and when it is time to pass on the baton, as each of us has to, whether in our work, in our existence or in our communities. Maybe then pass on the sense of optimism in which the work of each of these awardees today is grounded. Namaskar

