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Chief Guest - 2024**

Respected Chairman, Shri Shekhar Bajaj, the eminent policy maker and thinker, Dr. Mashelkar, the trustees of the Bajaj Foundation, family members of the Bajaj family, the juries, and most importantly, the awardees and friends. I especially want to mention three names from the audience. One is P. Sainath, whose very passionate and moving film, Nero's Guests, we have been using in youth camps to sensitize youth to the plight of farmer suicide. And two ladies present here, one Shobhana Radhakrishna, who was with me in Gandhi's ashram during our childhood, and Sujata Bajaj, who was my small young sister, and now she has become an internationally famous artist.

So, friends Dr. Mashelkar has been very kind and very generous in talking about me and introducing me to you, but I am aware of my smallness. The highest personalities of this country have graced the occasion as the chief guests, and so it's entirely your generosity that you invite me here to celebrate with you this day, this occasion, and honour our awardees. Let me congratulate our awardees, all the four awardees, and their organizations, because they and their organizations, they all work together for the exceptional work and dedication and the impact that they have created in their communities by giving them awards. Actually, as Dr. Mashelkar very rightly said, that we are being awarded, so let's all salute them.

While celebrating this occasion, I wish to ponder with you on two questions. What are we celebrating? And why are we celebrating? I propose to search with you the answer to these two questions today. 85 years ago, to be precise, in 1939, a young man of 22, who had created waves in central India at that time, because he has won the record number of gold medals in the history of Nagpur University. He was invited by Jamnalalji to meet him in Wardha. This young man went, and Jamnalalji asked him, "What are your plans after having such a beautiful academic achievement?" And like any other young man in those days, he said, "I'm thinking of going to the UK for studying and passing the ICS examination (*equivalent of IAS today, at that time it was ICS*). So, I want to go and do ICS". Jamnalalji wanted him to come and join as a professor in the new nationalist college which he was starting in Wardha. So Jamnalalji told him, "If you go for ICS, you will serve the British for the rest of your life. If you come to me in Wardha and join this college, you will serve the country for the rest of your life". And that made the choice. The young man chose the latter option, became professor in Jamnalalji's college. Later, he became a freedom fighter, went to jail, became a lifetime Gandhian, and finally, retired as one of the national leaders of the Gandhian movement in India. That young man was my father, Late Thakurdas Bang. And so, this personally connects me. If this episode had not happened, I wouldn't have happened and I wouldn't have been here today. So, my life is in a way, indirectly, very intricately linked with the influence of Jamnalalji.

Question I often ask myself, as to what was the power of Jamnalalji, that young man changed the course of his life? The power came from Jamnalalji, because he lived what he advised. We all know that Mahatma Gandhi's very famous quotation, it is so simple that we might really lose the deeper meaning of that. When he said, "My life is my message". What simple words. But how many of us can ever say that my life is my message? Mahatmaji's beauty was that he really lived what he said. And same about Jamnalalji. And that's why such messages, such lived messages, are far more powerful than spoken messages. The power of Jamnalalji, which he exerted on my father, came because he had lived it for the past 20 years. And, hence the impact.

To understand that power, I'll have to take you to Wardha, of nearly 85 years earlier. Wardha was a small district town in the central part of India. During 1930s and '40s, Wardha had become an

unofficial capital of nationalist movement of India, because Mahatmaji lived there. Letters from abroad, sometimes addressed as, "To the uncrowned Emperor of India". These letters were not delivered by the British post to the Viceroy of India, but they were delivered to Mahatma Gandhi in Sevagram. And so, such was Wardha at that time. And the man who was instrumental in bringing Mahatma Gandhi to Wardha and become his host and host of several of his activities, was Jammalal Bajaj.

Today, we know the name Bajaj for the several very successful business activities that the family does, and the family well deserves it. But we are here today to remember the *Adi Purush* of this Bajaj family who became the adopted 5th son of Mahatma. When at the young age, Jammalalji made this request, and with a little digression I must tell you, it's quite possible that Jammalalji had a deep feeling of an abandoned child. At the age of 5, he was given away to Bachhrajji Bajaj, in Wardha. So, from Rajasthan, this young child of 5 years was removed from his parents, and he went here. He probably always carried this sense of being abandoned. And so, when he requested Mahatma Gandhi that Bapu adopt me as your 5th son, Gandhiji accepted his request, but at the same time he said, "In accepting this relationship of father and son I am the receiver, and you will be the giver". And so, it happened. For the next 22 years, till Jammalalji's death in 1942, he carried the burden of becoming the host and the financier of Mahatma Gandhi's innumerable activities. Accepting the risk of the wrath of British Empire, being jailed five times in the freedom movement, staking his business for supporting the freedom movement, he truly became the *Bhamashah* of the freedom movement.

Those of you who would know, *Bhamashah* gave all his wealth to Rana Pratap in his fight. But here, Jammalalji similarly gave all his wealth. He probably was the only industrialist in India who sided and completely devoted his life, his talent, his money, his business and his family in the service of India and that of Mahatma. There is no other such example. He was the Treasurer of Congress party during the freedom movement, but additionally, there are some unknown facts. He also managed Jawaharlal Nehru's personal finances when he was in jail, and Jawaharlalji was in jail for 11 years. He also helped Rajendra Prasad to come out of a very big family debt that his brother had taken, he also helped Rajagopalachari, and he financed him to buy a house in Madras. Now Jammalalji, at that time, didn't know that these three men would become eventually the Prime Minister and the President and the first Governor General of India. So, all his support to the freedom movement and to the freedom fighters was without expecting any returns. It was literally the *Nishkama Karma Yoga*.

In the past two decades, the world has witnessed a unique phenomenon, and that is, giving away of wealth for societal causes. It famously began with Bill and Melinda Gates who gave away, to begin with, their huge wealth, followed by Warren Buffet. And now hundreds of millionaires and billionaires are giving away their wealth, fabulous wealth, to philanthropic causes world over. Why? Why are these Gates and Buffets in the world giving away their titles? When Bill Gates gave his money, \$55 billion, he was the richest person in the world. And by giving away this money he didn't become rich, and so Warren Buffet became the richest person in the world. Now we all know that how much intense competition is there to become the richest man in the world. But the surprising thing happened next. Warren Buffet said I can earn money, but I don't know how to use money. So, he gave all that \$37 billion wealth to Bill Gates and Melinda Gates to use for social purposes. So why is this competition? To give away money and give away also the title of the richest man in the world?

To understand this, we need to go little somewhere. Charles Handy, at one time, was a very well-known management guru next to Peter Drucker. He was Number 2 management guru in the world. He once very perceptively said that Marxism failed because it had a beautiful dream. And the dream of Marxism was really beautiful, all of us would share that, to have a society where everybody is equal, and to everyone, according to his need, and from everyone according to his capacity. A society where there will be no jail, where there will be no police. A dream land. Charles Handy said that Marxism failed because it had a beautiful dream of the society, but not the methods to realize

that dream. It could not find the political and economic methods by which that dream could become a reality.

But he further goes and then says that capitalism has beautiful and effective methods, but it has no dream. It has no soul. Earning individual wealth alone cannot be the dream for the whole world. And so, what Handy said was very spot on. He pointed out that capitalism needs a dream which goes beyond making individual wealth. The purpose of business is to make profit. But what is the purpose of the profit? Capitalism needs a larger purpose, something going beyond increasing the individual wealth alone.

I think that today's philanthropists are, in fact, trying to provide that social purpose to the profit. In a way, they are practicing what Mahatma Gandhi proposed nearly 100 years ago. Mahatma Gandhi advocated trusteeship as the ideal relationship between capital and the capitalist. The capitalist should voluntarily transform his personal ownership of the wealth to become the trustee of his wealth. That's what Gandhi said. The trustee protects, manages, grows the wealth and uses it for the larger cause. Gandhi often said that Jamnalal Bajaj comes closest to my idea of an ideal trustee

But then I believe that while Warren Buffet and Bill Gates are probably practicing what Gandhi said about trusteeship, but Jamnalalji was different than them. Buffet gave his \$37 billion wealth to philanthropy. That was a fabulous act. But not his time, not his life. He continued with his Berkshire Hathaway firm to earn further money. Bill Gates gave away, to begin with, \$55 billion, but he didn't stop at that. In 2005, the Time magazine in the US had selected some individuals as the Global Heroes of Health. I and Rani were one of them. So, when I had gone to receive that, whatever honor or award, Bill Gates was the chief guest. He had just given away his wealth. And then while talking to us, he said that I intend, within a few years, to completely give up my role at the Microsoft Corporation and give my entire time for the social causes. And he really did it. He resigned as the CEO of the Microsoft Corporation and devoted his complete time to Gates Foundation. And for the past nearly 15 years, he has been doing it.

Now Jamnalal Bajaj, he not only gave his wealth like Buffett and Gates, he devoted his time to the social causes, like Bill Gates has been doing, but he went even further. He followed Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy and principles in his personal life. And this is really so difficult! So difficult! The Rai Bahadur of 1918 gave up the rich living, started living like an ascetic, spinning *charkha*, weaving khadi and doing *gau-seva*. He had a Ford Motor car. But to make it more relevant to the rural area, he turned that Ford car. He took the body of the Ford car but removed the engine and put two bullocks there. So, this bullock-drawn Ford Motor car, he interestingly used to call it Ox Ford because it was driven by ox. So, Ox Ford, that vehicle was a very good symbol. He not only lived in this way, but he put his family, his wife, his children, through this acid test of voluntary poverty. He put Kamalnayan and Madalsa, his two children, into Vinoba's ashram. So thus, Jamnalalji became not only a philanthropist, but he became a philanthropist, a trustee and finally a *sadhaka*. And that is the rarest of the rare.

Just to take two examples of his inner effort to rise above the ordinary feelings. Let me take just two examples. Even when he was a businessman in the early days, when he took over from his grandfather's cotton trade, the practice in Bajaj group at that time was, the *munims* and the traders, junior employees, they used to spray water on the cotton and then sell water bundles. That made those cotton bundles heavy, and it used to fetch more price. Now young Jamnalal, who was hardly 20 at that time, he felt that this was unethical, and he couldn't do that. He asked them to stop. Now they thought that this young boy is foolish, he doesn't understand business, doesn't understand profit. They tried to convince him that everybody does this same way. Our competitors also do this. So, if we don't add water to the cotton, we will be the loser. Our margin will be less. Jamnalalji said, so be it, doesn't matter. And so, he stopped spraying water on the cotton bundles that they sold. But he was also a sharp businessman. So, what he did was, he put label on his cotton, 'water-free cotton'. And very soon the Britishers who used to purchase that cotton, they realized that in spite of little higher rates, financially it is profitable to purchase cotton from the Bajaj family, Bajaj business. So thus,

Jamnalalji showed that ethics is the best business policy in the long run; his yearning for ethical business and practicing ethics in his business and personal life.

The second aspect, we all know how much in our own hearts we suffer from what is called *vikara*. *Raag, dwesh, moha*, anger, *krodh*, all of us, 24 hours. These are the going on things in our heart. Now, a *Sadhaka*, especially one who is following Mahatma Gandhi and *Ekadashi vrat*, naturally wanted to raise 'Where had he reached?'

There's one very beautiful instance. Harikishan Bajaj was Jamnalal's cousin, but unfortunately, he had harassed Jamnalalji for 6 years by filing civil suits against him. When Harikishan Dasji was on his death bed, Jamnalalji went to see him and he asked him, 'Is there anything I can do for you?'. So, Harikishan said that 'I have written a book to defame you, but I don't have money to publish it'. Give me money. I want to publish it before I die'. And Jamnalalji gave him that money. Now, to rise above these kinds of personal petty feelings was another aspect. Thus, Jamnalalji went beyond the Buffets and Gates nearly 80 years ahead of them. It is my belief that Jamnalalji shows the direction, the horizon to today's philanthropists and industrialists, which way to go and how much to go. And why only to them? To all of us. All of us are limited by our personal petty feelings, aspirations, our drives, our competition, our attachment to money or if not to money to fame or something else. He actually showed us, and he tells us to become the trustee of the most important wealth that all of us have, that is our own life. We should become trustees of our life and use it for the social causes to give not only wealth and time for social causes but also to give up our greed, our anger, our jealousies and become better human beings.

By honoring today's awardees what are we celebrating? In addition to Jamnalalji two roles, being a freedom fighter of a national eminence and the role model trustee of his wealth, there is a third aspect to his life and his work. Gandhiji had nominated Jawaharlal Nehru as his political heir, Vinobaji as a spiritual heir, and Jamnalalji carried the legacy of Gandhi's another non-political work which was called in those times 'the constructive work'.

Constructive work was removing poverty, unemployment, lack of sanitation, inequality, untouchability, alcohol, ignorance, discrimination from rural India. Mahatmaji gave enormous importance to this constructive work. These were his means of parallel politics to the extent he said that the culmination of all constructive programs here, nearly 18 constructive programs, today we might call them development and social reforms, but he said that the culmination of the constructive programs will be *Poorna Swaraj*. So, not only freedom from the British, but freedom from all the several maladies that are present in Indian society and villages. So, while Gandhiji had adopted Jamnalal as his fifth son, his son became the adopted father of Mahatma Gandhi's constructive programs. Mahatma imagined, planned and Jamnalalji executed and nurtured a series of constructive programs. The troika of Mahatma, Vinobaji and Jamnalalji had created a new world, almost an alternative society, a new social order in and around Wardha. It was a world of alternative social and economic order. It was in this world of Wardha that I was born, brought up, educated in Gandhiji's own school, walked with Vinobaji holding his hands in Bhoodan movement. And the three ashrams where I lived and studied during my childhood were all located on the land donated by Jamnalalji and built by Jamnalalji.

So, at several levels at several planes, my life has been influenced and Jamnalalji has contributed to shaping my life. I was not intending to speak anything about my personal work or personal life here as the Chief Guest but on the special request that Shekharji has made, let me very briefly mention. When I grew up in this atmosphere, we used to move in Bhoodan padayatra from village to village. One day my elder brother, Ashok, who was four years older than me, he and I were passing in 1963 through the rural areas of hot Wardha, hot summer and May month of Wardha which is extremely hot. So, we stopped for a while under a tree and Ashok said, 'Abhay, we are now grown up'. I said, 'Yes, we are grown up'. I was 13-year-old. He said, 'Let us decide what will we do with our life'. I said, 'Let us decide'. I thought it was like eating chapati or bakhri. So, I said, 'Let us decide'. So, we

looked around and all these 13 years that we had seen in the villages of Wardha and in the ashrams and all those constructive programs, that must have all come together that influence. So, we two brothers decided that villages of India need more food, so agriculture must be improved, and they need improved health. So, my brother said, Ashok said, 'Okay, I'll improve agriculture of rural India'. So, I had no other option and by default then I said, 'Okay, I'll improve health of India'. At the age of 13 without really understanding the gravity of what we were committing but as if we had a tryst with destiny on that day what we will do with our life.

And Ashok did what he said. He has been working for the past 40 years in Wardha with the farmers. Wardha and Yavatmal are the capitals of farmer suicide. He has been working amongst them. And, naturally, I had to then study medicine. So, I studied medicine here in India, abroad. When we came back, to come to the question as to why Gadchiroli, that promise that we had made to each other, so my role was to improve the health of rural India. Where should we begin? Wardha was a place where I had grown up but then Mahatma Gandhi and Vinoba and Jamnalalji had worked there. What contribution could I make there? So, Rani and I thought that we should go to the place where we are needed the most. Gadchiroli was a new district carved out by government of Maharashtra out of the earlier Chandrapur district for its backwardness, dense forest, 40% population tribal, tigers and snakes and malaria and I don't want to list them in the same line but also Naxalite movement and violence. So, Gadchiroli was a district where nobody wanted to go and was full of problems. We heard from Tulasi Munda some of the aspects of tribal life. Gadchiroli has got that kind of tribal life.

Apart from the inspiration that I got in childhood from Gandhiji and from Wardha, my own belief has been that you have only one life, there is no once more here and you can't waste this life only in earning money. Money comes in billions and trillions. How much amount of money you are going to earn after all? It's going to be very, very, very small fraction of the global money. Life is far more precious, and I have only one life and there are trillions of dollars in the world. It would be a stupid barter to exchange your life for the sake of money because you have one life and money is unlimited. So, we made this. I think it was a very, very practical and prudent choice not to sell your life for the sake of money but in search of more meaningful life than money. And that's what it took us to Gadchiroli. In hindsight, I can also say that if anybody at the young age wants to select where to work, I would advise go where the problems are and not where the facilities are because places with facilities don't need you, you become a problem there. It's much better to go where nobody wants to go and you very easily become a pioneer. It doesn't take much to become a pioneer. Go where the problems are, see the problem, face the challenges and whatever little strength you have try to solve them. And so that's why we went to Gadchiroli. It's no personal wonder. There's nothing. It was part of the flow of the life that I chose that way. If at all credit must be given, it has to be given to Rani who didn't have this kind of family background, but she decided to come along with me.

So, I'll come back to the two programs. In that atmosphere where I grew up in Wardha, these constructive programs helped the poor and the needy at the material plane. For example, Khadi. Khadi was Mahatma Gandhi's probably the foremost constructive program. And even today, 75 years later, Khadi provides employment to 5 lakh spinners and weavers, every year Khadi fabric worth ₹6000 crores is still produced every year. Jamnalalji was the first founder President of All India Khadi Board that Congress Party had established. He, his wife, his children all did spinning and they all wore Khadi. But Khadi was not merely a cloth. We need to understand that atmosphere, that influence of Khadi. We need to go to that period. Khadi transcends being merely a cloth or product. It became a weapon in the hands of Mahatma Gandhian National Movement, a weapon by which every man, every woman, even his children could fight with the British Empire by sitting at home and spinning. Gandhi made freedom movement so much accessible to everybody. So, it was his political weapon. But even it went beyond that.

Khadi; let me tell you two examples. There were hundreds and thousands of Khadi spinners. Once some of them went to Mahatma Gandhi and complained that 'Bapu, the wages we get for spinning

Khadi are very low. It doesn't meet our needs'. It was an ethical question. So, Gandhiji assigned this role to Vinobaji, who had spent years working on Khadi, that what should be the fair minimum wages for spinning. So, Vinobaji said, 'Give me six months'. After six months when Vinobaji came back to meet Gandhi, he had lost 30 pounds of weight. Gandhiji first asked him, 'What has happened?'. So, he said, 'You had given me a task, what will be the fair and ethical minimum wage for a spinner. For the past six months I am spinning every day eight hours and whatever I spin, the wages I get, I only eat food of that much amount only. And this is the effect that I had on me'. And, so, based on that, Vinoba's live experience on himself, the wages of spinning were tripled by Mahatma Gandhiji to make wages fair. So, Mahatma Gandhi said at that time that I do not want my Khadi to be soaked in the blood of the poor spinner.

Once during the freedom movement when a morcha/procession was going on 'Bharat Mata ki Jai', a rich woman was going in a car but because of procession the car was held up. So, she was curiously looking at the procession and she got so motivated emotionally that she left the car, to join the procession, and everybody was arrested. So, while police arrested her, there were a lot of ornaments on her body because she was going for some other function. So, they told her 'Madam, don't know what will happen to all these ornaments of yours. Take them off before getting arrested'. So, she took out all the ornaments, must be some million rupees worth, tied them in a handkerchief and then she looked around and she saw one man. She said, 'Mister, please, will you take these ornaments and give it to my husband', who was a very well-known, rich man of the city. And then she went to jail. After six months she was released. When she came back home, she thought that her husband would very severely scold her for losing all the ornaments, but ornaments had already reached home. So, they invited that man who had brought those ornaments. After having a dinner with him, that man asked them, 'Madam, I have a question that how did you trust me from that crowd and gave these million rupees worth of ornaments? Why did you trust that I'll really give it to your husband?'. She said, 'Nothing. You are wearing Khadi and that was the only, only stamp' and based on that she could trust. In those days, Khadi was a moral value system, it was not a cloth alone. It represented simplicity, austerity, equality, support to the farmers who produce cotton, to the spinners and weavers who produce cloth. Khadi united the whole nation against the British. Khadi was a brand representing several moral and life values.

In a similar way, each of the constructive program of Mahatma Gandhi, which Jamnalalji supported and nurtured, represented several moral value systems. Today's awardees are the modern-day soldiers of similar constructive program, and I can connect with each of them. Girija and his associates, Satish and Girija were in the youth movement when I was also part of Jayaprakash Narayan's Youth Movement. See, Rashmi Bhartiji has been using science and technology to uplift in the Uttarakhand. We had done a little bit of that. Dr. Tulasi Munda who has so passionately and from her heart communicated to her a life of a tribal woman and the work she has been doing. So, all of these I have experienced and so I feel a personal connect with them. Finally, when Rev. Erik Kumedisa was speaking, it was very heartening as well as humbling to hear from him and Gandhi's thoughts and philosophy being echoed back to us from Africa because we are losing them.

It is heartening that it is coming back to us from Africa. But this is not the first time it is coming back from Africa. And let me tell you an interesting instance. In '1894 that famous episode, the Pietermaritzburg Station where Gandhiji was thrown on the platform, and that's where actually his whole struggle began. So, in 1994, hundred years after that episode, that platform was dedicated to Mahatma Gandhi and a statue was erected in Pietermaritzburg and Nelson Mandela was the President of South Africa, at that time. While unveiling that statue, Nelson Mandela said, and I'm trying to literally quote him. He said, 'Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, you passed through us 100 years ago but we ourselves were in chain. So, we couldn't honor and recognize you. But let me tell India...'. Nelson Mandela says in 1994, 'Let me tell India that 100 years ago you sent a young, stumbling lawyer to us. 20 years later, we sent back a Mahatma'. So, the birth of Satyagraha, it occurred in Johannesburg in 1906. Actually, Mahatma Gandhi as a Mahatma was born in South

Africa and so it is very heartening today to again hear a person coming back from South Africa and telling us the message of nonviolence.

In honoring them, all four awardees, we are assuring the Mahatma and Jammalalji that the fight against poverty, ill health, injustice, discrimination, ignorance is not over. It is continued. Today, for all of us, for the Jammalal Bajaj Foundation and for all of us, it is a day to remember and celebrate the life of Jammalalji and to connect with his modern-day successors - the biological heirs, the philanthropical successors and to the successors of his constructive work. Let them inspire us. Thank you.

