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Hon'ble Chief Guest of the awards function this evening, respected Shri Kailash Satyarthiji, Distinguished members of the advisory board, proud awardees, distinguished invitees, ladies and gentlemen.

I want to extend a very warm welcome to you all to our coveted 43rd Jamnalal Bajaj Awards function this evening. Today's function is unique. There are many firsts to today's function.

After establishing Jamnalal Bajaj Awards, the award ceremony was held without a single break for around four decades.

2020 saw an unprecedented break in our awards due to an unprecedented pandemic. This was a first ever.

We are resuming the awards in 2021 in a virtual mode due to the pandemic. Yet another first for us.

There is another first. Our beloved Rahul bhai could not make it to the function today. His charismatic presence and his ever so effervescent speech were always the highlight of each of our functions. Rahul bhai, we sorely miss you today. I am sure you will be back with us in 2022 with full vigour.

I want to welcome our Chief Guest Kailash Satyarthi ji. He was our chief guest in the year 2014, When Kailashji became the first India born Indian to win the Nobel Peace Prize. They say, all good things have to be repeated. So, we requested him again to be our chief guest and he graciously accepted.

It will take me hours to describe his amazing life and work. I won't do that.

It is most aptly summarised in just few powerful words in his inspiring Nobel prize citation, that his Nobel prize is for "struggle against the suppression of children and young people and for the right of all children to education." Again, a warm welcome to you Kailash ji for gracing the awards function today.

Our awards carry a great prestige, great value, not just the monetary one, but the value that is associated with the very name of Jamnalal Bajaj, a great humanitarian, a valiant freedom fighter, a compassionate philanthropist and a passionate social reformer.

Jamnalalji was an ardent Mahatma Gandhi follower. He practiced Gandhian ethics in every sphere of his life – political, social, business and personal. Therefore, the awards are given to those exceptional individuals, who are committed to inclusive development in line with Gandhian constructive work program.

The Gandhian principles continue to remain important today. Why do I say this? Because more the things change in India, more they remain the same at least in some cases, where human dignity is at stake.

Mahatma Gandhi had said 'removal of untouchability is one of the highest expressions of ahimsa'. But what is the grim reality today?

Take what Chandrashekhar and his family belonging to Chennadasar community had to go through very recently in Miyapur village in Karnataka. Chandrashekhar had gone with his family to seek blessings for the birthday of his two-year-old son. His family was standing outside the Hanuman temple. His two-year-old son left his mother's hand and just ran inside the temple. His Dalit family was fined Rs. 25,000 and for what? For the purification of the temple!

Mahatma Gandhi had said "down with the monster of caste that masquerades in the guise of varna"

The caste based discrimination still continues. As per the Oxfam report, just 37.2 per cent of SC households and 25.9 per cent of ST households had access to non-shared sanitation facilities, compared to 65.7 per cent for the general population.

More significantly, the Gandhian principles have become even more important now in the post-pandemic era than they were before the pandemic. Let's see why.

The coronavirus pandemic hit the humanity very hard. We witnessed painful loss of millions of lives and livelihoods. The entire world got into a reset mode. The rapidity and scale of change was phenomenal. The poor and the vulnerable were worst hit, and India was no exception.

The Oxfam report shows that India's large informal workforce was the worst hit as it made up 75 per cent of the 122 million jobs lost. There were devastating consequences for 40-50 million seasonal migrant workers that we were all witness to. With the sharp rise of inequalities, pursuit of Gandhian engineering, that creates the magic of access equality despite income inequality, is essential, not just optional.

As we know, as a global leader in social reforms, our Chief Guest Kailash ji campaigned against child labour in India and advocated the universal right of children to education.

What the pandemic has done is to reverse several years of work in just few months in the area of child labour and children's education.

For instance, I saw the UNICEF report on the impact of COVID-19 crisis on the lives of children in India that came out just after the World Children's Day on 20 November 2020. It said that COVID-19 is a Child Rights Crisis.

The report says that over 290 million children are out of school, and sending their children into labour is a way of coping for many families. Overall, the community-based monitoring, meaning the CBM findings, show that overall, about one in every four mothers reported that they were not sure about their child going back to school after pandemic. It is very unfortunate that families are resorting to negative coping mechanisms, including child labour and early marriage.

Another report published a couple of months ago says that pandemic-induced school closures have resulted in “catastrophic consequences” for students, especially for those in rural areas, with a mere 8% studying regularly online and 37% not studying at all.

In this background, we recall the 2019 Jamnalal Bajaj awardee for application of science and technology for rural development, Mr. Mohammad Imran Khan. A decade before the pandemic hit us, he had strongly believed that e-learning, digital learning is a platform for learning without discrimination; and it will be a boon for the rural students to access and explore new horizons in educational and learning content.

He created over eighty educational ‘Apps’ to provide quality content for learning, access to education, to engage school children, to reduce school dropout rate and bridge the digital gap. These Apps have been huge help during the pandemic for the rural poor. We are so proud to have chosen an awardee, who has made a big difference.

Now I turn to our distinguished awardees for 2021. They are four exemplars, who have made a huge difference.

One showing how by application of science and technology, one can create community oriented environment friendly technology with models that would give high returns to rural mountain communities.

Another has given our society’s most vulnerable a new lease of life, be they the unfortunate traumatised women or children or older people.

Yet another has shown how a radical social transformation can be achieved in a far flung tribal region and how *antodaya* can lead to *sarvodaya*.

And then there is one, who shows how the powerful instrument of social technology can be used to revive communities, if only one identifies and practices the basic elements of Gandhian philosophy.

Finally, in this new digital world, a new term has been coined. It is called ‘augmented humanity’. The idea is to empower individuals with new breakthrough digital technologies so that they can perform to their limit in many walks of life.

I am convinced that the crux of ‘real augmented humanity’ lies in imparting Gandhian values. And I am happy and proud that our Jamnalal Bajaj awards are doing precisely this by honouring those, who preserve, propagate, and practice Gandhian values.

So finally, we salute and applaud our 2021 awardees, for their magnificent contribution to the creation of the much needed ‘real augmented humanity’, as well as help us create a better world for not just some, but for all, and that too with the timeless Gandhian values.

Thank you.

