

Address by Azim Premji, Chairman, Wipro Corporation, at the Hunger Project, October 2005

Members of the jury and friends,

It is a great pleasure to be with you today as we honour three journalists for winning the 2005 Sarojini Naidu Prize. It is also a good time to remember the person after whom this prize is named. Sarojini Naidu was not only a well-known freedom fighter, but also the first woman to become Governor of an Indian state. She seemed to have inherited at least some of the spirit from her father. He was a crusader who pioneered women's education by establishing the Nizam's College in Hyderabad in 1878. I am recounting these facts because they are significant to what I have to say today.

Let me begin by complimenting the three winning journalists of the 2005 Sarojini Naidu Prize. The fourth estate has to play a vital role if we need to reawaken India's social consciousness. And these journalists are at forefront of this endeavour – these journalists care about the issues that affect people's lives, about issues that will determine the future of our nation. They have used their skills, creativity and love for India to put a spotlight on one of the most needed changes in our country today – the leadership of elected women at the grassroots level.

The Hunger Project is a unique social experiment. It recognises that hunger, poverty and inequity are only symptoms of deeper socio-structural malaise. Therefore, attacking hunger by doling out food will only offer temporary relief. Hunger will not end if hungry people continue to be treated as beneficiaries of sympathy. The work of ending hunger must begin with building from people's own creativity, their skill and will to make different things happen. Hunger can be ended and it must be ended.

By hunger, I do not only mean those who are starving or afflicted by famine or natural disasters. These usually garner the attention of the larger society. But these are only a small percentage of the total population who are malnourished and do not have sufficient energy to contribute their mite and earn their living in a productive way. It is necessary to create the right environment for them to move into the mainstream of society.

In developing countries, women and girls are the most affected by hunger and poverty. Traditionally, women bear the primary responsibilities in the most relevant areas - food production, nutrition, family planning, primary health and education. Yet most development inputs continue to go to men. Empowerment of women is key to transforming their lives and those of their families. Having women, who understand these issues from a deeper personal experience, at the helm of leadership is a remarkable achievement.

There is yet another important task on hand. I am convinced that true self-reliance can never happen without education. Educating children, especially girls, must be top most on your list of priorities. Education connects us to people and the world around us. It is the basic foundation for a just and humane society. Education can create 'socially awakened' people.

However, the education I envision is different from what happens in our schools today. Today, in our schools, children learn through rote. In most classrooms, the teacher is the one who "knows" and she transfers this knowledge through a one-way flow of information to the child. One symptom of this is that in alarmingly large number of cases, children "know" the answer to a question, but have not really understood anything. You will be surprised to learn that this is a universal problem – not only in our rural government schools, but also in the popular private or elite schools in urban areas.

I ask you, how can we think of a democratic society when our classrooms are autocratic? But schools treat our children like clay; they try and mould this clay into standard pots. This is very harmful, and has to stop. Each child is unique, and we do great harm by trying to

condition them and mould them. I would like to argue that true learning cannot happen in such a paradigm of education. We need to fundamentally re-look at the way our education system delivers education today. I understand some effort to this extent has been made in the recent National Curriculum Framework and I congratulate the people who have been responsible for attempting a shift.

One analogy I find useful is this. Children are like seeds, they are born with immense potential. If you nurture them with care and guidance, they will blossom into beautiful trees. If this seems utopian, let me assure you that it is not. Indian history is replete with examples – the schools of Tagore and Gandhi bear testimony to this. And there are some schools today across India living this ideal.

The key question then is: what does it take for typical mainstream schools to transform into one that guides the development of humane children who have developed character – individuals with a sense of purpose, a touchstone of values, and a set of life-skills?

The answer, my friends, lies within you. You have to go back to your communities and take an active interest in your community schools. You need to join hands with your teachers, with your educational officials, and see that we do justice to our children. You must see that your school is a democratic and secular institution enlivened with the spirit of harmony. Then you will see the kind of society you have potentially created

Globally, people are recognising that India's greatest resource is its people – the vast majority of whom live in rural areas. With better health and better education, with greater human dignity for both women and men, our people represent a creative and productive potential unmatched anywhere in the world.

For too long, our country has been wallowing in poverty, malnutrition, hunger and social discrimination. And nothing indicates this better than the condition of our girl children and of our women. Do you know that in India, one in every four girl children will die in their childhood? That India has among the highest maternal mortality rates in the world? This is fuelled by chronic malnourishment of our women – UNDP estimates 88% of all pregnant women in India are anaemic – the worst status anywhere in the world! As a society, we have neglected the health and education of our girl children for too long.

This is the time for change. India has taken the significant step of boldly pushing for the entry of women into political life. This is changing the face of our panchayati raj institutions. Today, as women take their place as panchayat leaders, they are shifting the development agenda to the issues that women care the most about: nutrition, health, education, water and sanitation for the children and for the families. These women are a new role model for rural India. To the women elected to the panchayats, I want to say that I am committed to your success. I am proud to be among those standing in partnership with you.

In my many years, if there is one lesson I have learnt, it is this. We may be a nation of over one billion people. Yet, the action that each one of us takes (or fails to take), truly matters. It is not the number of hungry mouths we need to count, but the reservoir of energy that can be unleashed by their minds. I wish each one of you the very best as you set out to transform India.

Thank you.