

**ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA,  
SHRI RAM NATH KOVIND  
ON THE OCCASION OF PRESENTATION OF INTERNATIONAL  
GANDHI AWARDS**

**New Delhi, February 6, 2020**

1. I am happy to welcome all of you here in Rashtrapati Bhavan on the occasion of presentation of the International Gandhi Award for Leprosy. This award is special because it commemorates and reminds us of the compassion that Gandhiji possessed and service he rendered towards people afflicted with leprosy. This award recognises the work of individuals and organisations who have worked tirelessly to fight this disease and the prejudices associated with it.
2. I extend my heartiest congratulations to the recipients of this award for year 2019. Dr N. S. Dharamshaktu has been recognised today for devoting several years of his life in the cause of fighting Leprosy. Similarly, the Leprosy Mission Trust India, has been working with and for people affected by Leprosy for over a century. Both these awardees deserve great appreciation for their service to this cause.
3. I also compliment the Gandhi Memorial Leprosy Foundation for instituting the International Gandhi Award for Leprosy. Ever since its establishment in 1950, this Foundation has done pioneering work to eradicate the disease and to erase the stigma associated with the disease.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

4. We are celebrating the 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, whose compassion for patients of leprosy was exemplary. He understood the social dimensions of leprosy and worked relentlessly to reintegrate patients into the social mainstream. And we must remember, Gandhiji worked for the cause of Leprosy patients at a time when ignorance about the disease was

widespread and prejudices against those suffering from it were extremely rigid. Gandhiji led by example – often tending to leprosy patients personally.

5. The Gandhi Leprosy Memorial Foundation and many of you are associated with Wardha. Last year, I had the privilege of visiting Gandhiji's Sevagram Ashram. Not far from there, Baba Amte anchored his social reform movement, to provide care to leprosy patients and hope to the underprivileged. Gandhiji began his Leprosy program at the Ashram. He included the cause of Leprosy patients in the 18-point Constructive Programme which was his framework for the India of his dreams.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

6. In our fight against Leprosy, we have achieved a lot over the years. We have successfully accomplished levels of leprosy elimination defined as less than one case per ten thousand population. Further, the stigma and prejudice against leprosy has reduced considerably, thanks to the constant work of scientists, researchers, organisations and community workers. However, we cannot let our guard down. New cases continue to occur and high-burden pockets of the disease do exist.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

7. The major challenge in leprosy control activities lies in sustaining the same level of focus and commitment especially in low-resource settings where equity of access is an issue. We need to intensify our efforts towards early detection of leprosy cases, provide equitable access to appropriate treatment and provide integrated leprosy services in the geographically focused areas.
8. We must recognise all those who contribute to this cause. Last year, I had the privilege of honoring Mr Yohei Sasakawa of Japan with Gandhi Peace Prize for his efforts to eliminate Leprosy in India and work for welfare of Leprosy patients. We also recognized Shri Damodar Ganesh Bapat with Padma Shri in 2018 for his work among Leprosy patients in Chhattisgarh.

9. While, Governments, healthcare system and different organisations are all working to ameliorate this situation, each one of us also has a role to play. I have also been associated with the work that one such organisation, Divya Prem Seva Mission based in Haridwar has been doing among patients of leprosy and their families. More than the medical condition, the social stigma attached to the disease persists and this is a cause for concern. We have to become aware and educated on this disease and its different dimensions, and spread that awareness among our communities. We need to empower those who have been discriminated on account of leprosy through advocacy and information dissemination. I am very sure that with determination and clear focus, we shall surely win the battle against leprosy.

Thank you,  
Jai Hind!