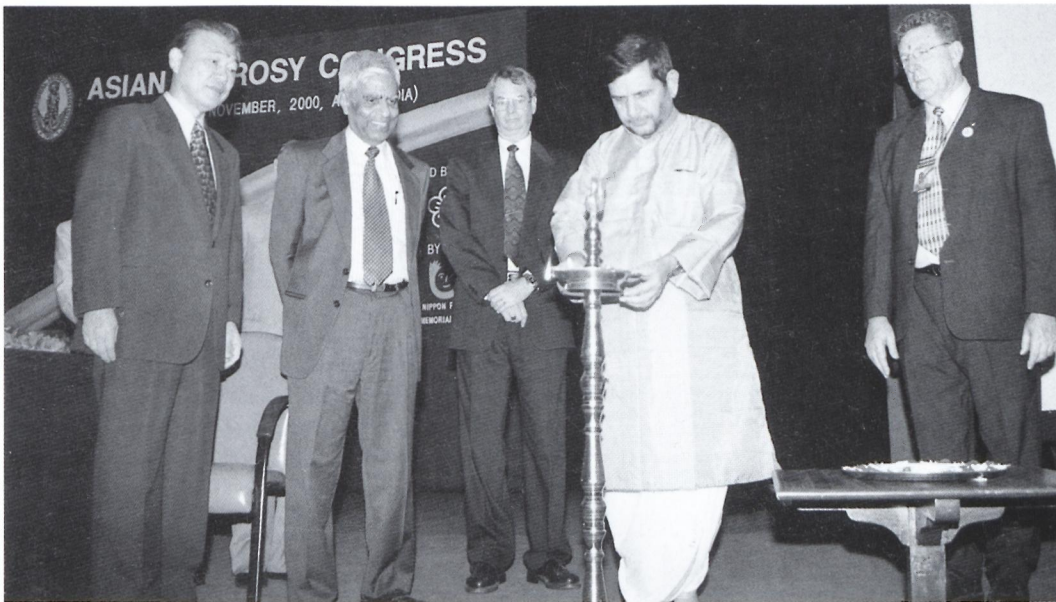


ASIAN LEPROSY CONGRESS

INAUGURATION CEREMONY

9 November 2000



Mr. Sharad Yadav, Union Minister, inaugurating the Congress by lighting the lamp. Also seen are (left to right) Mr. Yohei Sasakawa, Dr. S. K. Noordeen, Dr. Kim Farley (WHO) and Mr. Terry Vasey (ILEP).

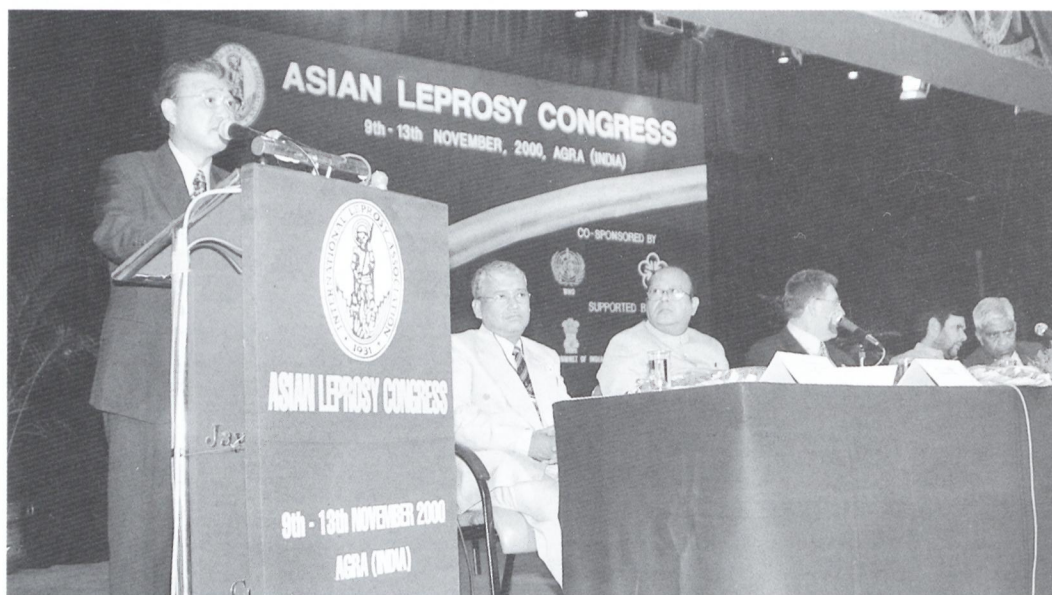
The Congress was inaugurated by the Union Minister, Mr. Sharad Yadav. In his inaugural address Mr. Yadav made a clarion call for a redoubling of efforts to eliminate leprosy as a public health problem in India before the extended deadline of 2005. Mr. Yadav said then only would be realized the dream of Mahatma Gandhi to liberate India from leprosy. Elimination of leprosy was an important plank of Gandhiji's Swaraj platform, he said recalling that Gandhiji had taken into his Ashram Mr. Parchure Shastri suffering from leprosy and personally treated and looked after him regularly to rid the ailment of its social stigma and to underline the importance of fighting the age-old affliction.

The Minister congratulated the states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu on bringing

down leprosy prevalence drastically and called for their experience to be utilized in the five states of Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal, which now bear the major brunt of India's leprosy burden.

Mr. Yadav linked leprosy to poverty, noting that leprosy was relatively more prevalent in slums, tribal areas and other poverty-stricken pockets of the society—as indeed the other ills of mankind—and said poverty alleviation was truly the greatest challenge India faced and must meet.

Dr. S. K. Noordeen, Chairman of the Organizing Committee, in his welcoming address said the Congress, first by the International Leprosy Association (ILA) to focus attention on a region, was being held at an important juncture in the fight against lep-



Mr. Yohei Sasakawa addressing the Congress.

rosy. Hence has been the effort to bring to it as many as possible field workers, the unsung direct fighters of leprosy. The commitment of India to the elimination of leprosy was one of the highest in the world, he said.

Dr. Noordeen said the dramatic reduction of the prevalence of leprosy throughout the world would not have been possible without strong collaboration by nongovernmental organizations (NGO) and philanthropic associations with government agencies. He noted in particular the enormous contributions of resources and commitment by The Nippon Foundation and the Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation over the past quarter of a century and also the generous support with resources and stimulus for action provided by the international NGOs under the banner of the International Federation of Anti-Leprosy Associations (ILEP) to the endemic countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. The World Health Organization (WHO) is playing a critical role by providing effective technical support and guidelines as well as leadership in mobilizing national political commitment for leprosy elimination.

Dr. Yo Yuasa, the president of the ILA, said there was no question that the fight against the leprosy germ, *Mycobacterium leprae*, which started in the mid-1940s with

the drug promin became highly effective with MDT, the multidrug therapy introduced in the early 1980s. Humankind's millennia-long struggle was now approaching a very important milestone: "the elimination of leprosy as a public health problem" in the year 2005. Ahead after that is the much more difficult struggle for overcoming the terrible medical and social effects on the affected individuals, their families and society itself. For the goal was not "a world without leprosy" as such but, more realistically, "a world without problems—medical and social—related to leprosy."

Dr. Yuasa said that India had by far made the largest contribution to the fight against leprosy and yet it still faced the heaviest leprosy burden in the world. Delegates would hopefully gain from the Congress new knowledge of problems and develop new strategies for solutions, and return to their posts better equipped to do a more effective job.

Mr. Yohei Sasakawa, President of The Nippon Foundation, recounted how his father, Mr. Ryoichi Sasakawa, had over 30 years ago committed himself to the mission of eradicating leprosy on seeing patients suffer social ostracism. With determination to see that the cure, if available, reached people everywhere and with all possible

speed, he lent his aid to WHO's leprosy program and established the Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation to work with ILEP members in bringing the cure to where it was needed. The Nippon Foundation had done its part by providing grants totaling over 200 million U.S. dollars to organizations fighting leprosy—including \$122 million to WHO.

Mr. Sasakawa said the courageous, swift and thorough technical decisions by WHO, the united front forged by ILEP and other NGOs in prioritized field control action, and the response of governments of leprosy-endemic countries to the challenge had resulted in the treatment of a full 100% of new patients, no matter where they lived, with the standard MDT regimen free of charge.

The task, Mr. Sasakawa said, was not yet complete, particularly in the South Asian region. India, Nepal and Myanmar still face a difficult road ahead. However, there exist today enough ground for a solid alliance among all the partners to bring an end to the suffering from leprosy. But that alliance would remain an empty image unless the field workers after learning and discussing at the Congress take a step forward when, on return to the field, faced reality. The successful conclusion to the struggle for a victory against leprosy would be recorded in the history of the 21st century for future generations to appreciate their role in meeting what had been a noble challenge to humankind.

In the address read at the Congress by Dr. Robert J. Kim Farley, WHO representative to India, Dr. Uton Muchtar Rafei, WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia, noted that although the world had made tremendous efforts and brought down the prevalence of leprosy, the original target year of 2000 for elimination had to be rescheduled to 2005. All of the countries of the South-East Asia Region had shown a substantial decline in the prevalence rate of leprosy during the last 15 years since MDT became available. Ten million cases had been detected, 9.3 million had been cured, the visibly deformed among newly detected patients had been markedly reduced, and

Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Thailand had reached the elimination goal, and Indonesia was expected to reach the target by this year end. But, due to the magnitude of their problems and shortcomings, including weak health infrastructure, India, Myanmar and Nepal had to reschedule the goal of leprosy elimination, India alone contributing to 66% of the global burden. The three countries of India, Myanmar and Nepal had, however, stepped up case detection and surveillance, and were intensifying efforts to reach and inform people that leprosy can be easily cured.

To achieve the 2005 goal, Dr. Uton noted, a new initiative, the Global Alliance for Elimination of Leprosy chaired by the government of India, would hold its first meeting 30–31 January 2001 in New Delhi, and along with 12 leprosy-endemic countries would work out concrete steps for action. That meeting will be followed by an advocacy meeting on leprosy elimination.

Although a lot of work still had to be done and the task at hand was not easy, Dr. Uton said he was sure the goal of 2005 was achievable with the expertise, experience and dedicated efforts of all field workers.

Mr. Terry Vasey, President of the International Federation of Anti-Leprosy Associations (ILEP), stated that leprosy workers had done tremendous work curing 10 million people so far. The thrust now is to eliminate leprosy as a public health problem. If we can reintegrate into the society those who have been excluded, we would have achieved something. The goal is not only a world without leprosy but one where there are no consequences of leprosy. Cooperation from India has been a beacon for other countries. Leprosy is not anybody's problem but everybody's problem, from governments to nongovernmental organizations.

Dr. C. S. Walter, Director for South-East Asia of The Leprosy Mission, in proposing the vote of thanks, expressed the hope that the problems posed by leprosy would, as a result of the action taken by field workers after their deliberations at the Congress, fly away in the language of the civil aviation minister Mr. Sharad Yadav.