

Inaugural Address by Foreign Secretary at the St. Stephen's Young Leaders Neighbourhood First Fellowship Programme

March 02, 2022

**Principal of St. Stephen's College, Professor John Varghese, Director of St Stephens' Center for Advanced Learning, Dr. Geetanjali Sethi,
Members of the Governing Body and faculty of St. Stephen's College,
My colleagues from the Ministry of External Affairs,
Participants of the Young Leaders Neighbourhood First Fellowship Programme,
Dear Students,
Ladies and gentlemen,**

Good morning.

At the outset, let me thank Principal John Varghese and the St. Stephen's College faculty for inviting me to deliver the inaugural address at the St. Stephen's Young Leaders Neighbourhood First Fellowship Programme. I am delighted to be back in these hallowed portals after four decades.

2. I wish to felicitate St. Stephen's College for taking the initiative to set up the Young Leaders Neighbourhood First Fellowship Programme, which seeks to bring together some of the most outstanding young professionals from our neighbouring countries. This is being organized under the rubric of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme run out of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. The Programme is in keeping with India's Neighbourhood First Policy.

3. The Ministry of External Affairs is happy to work with St Stephens College, and its Center for Advanced Learning, in launching this programme.

4. I understand that 21 professionals from Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka are participating in the Programme. This group is special for a number of reasons. It is a pioneering group. It is a carefully selected group composed of very accomplished individuals. It is a young group. It is a representative group. Very importantly, it is a group that represents our hopes for the future.

5. We are also meeting at a very special institution. St Stephens College is a center of learning. Its reputation is based on an established record of promoting excellence. It is a College that is known for the high quality of its curriculum and instruction. It has, to use an analogy from advertising, very strong brand equity in its domain.

6. It is refreshing for me to be back in an academic atmosphere. The world of education is an exciting one because it is a unique combination of continuity and change. There are some values that are eternal and have remained constant in this world. It is also a world that must adjust rapidly to the swiftly changing realities of contemporary life in order to remain relevant. They have to remain ahead of the curve. They must be the crucibles where the future is forged.

7. The nomenclature of the programme captures the spirit of the programme. It contains both our priorities and our aspirations.

8. Two of our central priorities are our neighbourhood, as I referred to earlier, and our focus on the youth.

9. Our aspiration is to ensure a better future for the generations that will succeed us.
10. Our aspiration is also to do what we can to equip those who will manage our tomorrow with the intellectual resources to deal with their complex responsibilities. The burdens, that you will face, I am sure, will be heavy.
11. All of us, and the nations that we come from, are neighbours. We share a geographical space. We share resources and commons.
12. We also share a heritage and history.
13. I believe that we share a common outlook in the manner we approach life. I also believe that we share the aspirations that I referred to.
14. These commonalities and shared aspirations underlie India's Neighbourhood First policy.
15. At the instance of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, India accords the highest priority to our relations with the countries represented here today, viz., Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives and Sri Lanka, and to other countries in our neighbourhood.
16. It is these countries that come first and foremost amongst our foreign policy priorities. It is in this theater that the largest share of diplomatic resources – time, manpower, programs and financial resources – are deployed.
17. It is with these countries, broadly speaking, that we work most closely with.
18. I have mentioned our shared aspiration to ensure a better future for succeeding generations.
19. In the spirit of Sabina Sanath Vikas, India believes that its prosperity and growth is linked to that of its neighbours. We cannot develop unless our neighbours develop.
20. We strongly believe that economic good is not just good in itself. It will also create win-win propositions for the region that will address many of the negativities that we confront.
21. Our region is one in which many countries have demonstrated extremely impressive rates of economic growth. Several of us have had transformational journeys. Many of us are wealthier, healthier and better educated than we were before.
22. These advances have been made in the face of the challenges that we all have faced.
23. We have learnt during our journeys that many of our problems have the same solutions. Thinking about these shared challenges and solutions and developing the will to apply these solutions on scale while keeping in mind national sensitivities and the requirements of sovereignty is one of the major challenges that we face together.
24. Youth, like the fellows in this programme, are another central priority for us.
25. We are a young region. At least quarter - and more frequently about 40% - of the populations in the countries that are represented in this room are under the age of 18. The majority of our populations are usually under the age of thirty.

26. This points to an incredibly rich and dynamic human resource base. It also points to a highly productive population base that has driven the economic progress that I have referred to earlier.
27. People like you, and the demographic that you represent, are our hope for the future.
28. We are, because of this combination of demographic and economic conjunction, at a point in our national and economic journey when much is possible.
29. India is determined to make positive contributions towards seizing the moment.
30. This moment of opportunity is accompanied by the major policy challenge of constructing a response. That challenge requires all of us to work together.
31. That is why we have worked with St Stephens College and its Center for Advanced Learning in supporting this innovative programme in which you are all participating.
32. The idea behind this programme is to bring together young people from across our region with the intention of building capacities and of harnessing energies and aspirations. It is an effort to add to networks and contacts that will contribute to generating goodwill. It is an effort to encourage young people to think of common solutions for common problems.
33. The fellowship has accordingly been designed to expose you to thought leaders in India, to cutting-edge thinking, to best practices and to front-line institutions and processes that deal with the most pressing challenges of the day.
34. We believe that the policy studies approach will add value to this program. It is an interdisciplinary approach. It combines an academic perspective with that of a practitioner. It also brings in combined and hybrid perspectives. It brings in governmental and non-governmental approaches. It involves interaction with state institutions and civil society. It brings in a diverse and carefully considered set of topics.
35. India has, as you might be aware, a cluster of world-class institutions and capabilities. We would like to bring you in touch with them. We would also like this to be a two-way process. We have a lot to learn from our neighbours and their efforts.
36. You have all been selected because we believe that you represent the future as young leaders. We believe that you will go on to stations of greater responsibility and influence. We would therefore like to hear from you. We would like to understand your perceptions and priorities. We would like to listen to your ideas about how we can craft solutions and institutions that contribute to our goal of building a better tomorrow.
37. We are also confident that this process of exchanging views and perceptions will build on existing efforts, formal and informal, to work together. We expect that the fellowship will contribute to the creation of additional formal and informal institutions and networks. It will contribute to creating an eco-system of young people who are invested in the well-being of our region. These will all help in dealing with the challenges of an increasingly interlinked and borderless future.
38. Rabindranath Tagore, who is respected across the region, and who wrote the national anthems of two of our countries – India and Bangladesh, said that "Age considers, youth ventures." We hope that the programme, in this spirit, will foster innovative and ambitious 21st century thinking and outlooks.

39. We are confident that the course content of the programme, which has been constructed with considerable effort and attention to detail, will meet these requirements.

40. We are also confident that this innovation will augment the variety and relevance of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme. We offer training slots of varying lengths and levels, and on a large number of subjects - to friends across the world through ITEC. We work hard to make sure that our development partnership initiatives are responsive to the demands of our partner states. We are confident that this fellowship, which also arose in response to demand, will be popular.

41. The focus of this programme begins with our friends in the neighbourhood and reinforces another component of our thought, namely, that globalisation, for India, begins with our neighbourhood.

42. We inhabit a world that has been redefined by the pandemic. We do not know what the future holds for us. We do know however that we are required to be more resilient, more agile and more alert.

43. It also provides us a model for future cooperation. When the dust settles, the international cooperation behind the unprecedented speed with which a vaccine was developed, and the scale of the vaccination effort, will become a benchmark for responses to problems that might emerge on this scale.

44. This programme is one of the first initiatives we are supporting in our attempt to live with the newer post-pandemic realities.

45. We hope that you will devote a part of your time to considering how we can be innovative and effective in dealing with future Black Swan events.

46. I would like to end by referring to our great spiritual leader Swami Vivekananda. Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently quoted him saying that "My faith is the younger generation, the modern generation." This is as true today as when Swami Vivekananda first said it.

47. I would like to thank St Stephens College for developing this programme. I wish them all success in conducting it. I would like to thank all of my colleagues in the Ministry of External Affairs and our Heads of Missions in neighbouring countries for working to make this innovative programme a success [Anupam, Sumit]

48. Lastly, I wish all of you a pleasant and rewarding stay in India. I hope that you will find this programme useful. I hope that you will refer to your participation in it with pride in the years ahead. I hope you will recommend it to your compatriots.

49. We hope that you will remain in touch with us and the friends and contacts you will make. We would certainly like to remain in touch with you.

50. I wish you all the very best individually and collectively.

Thank you.