

The 27th Niwano Peace Prize Presentation Ceremony
The President's Address

I would like to heartily thank the many guests, and in particular [insert names of principal guests], who are attending this Presentation Ceremony of the twenty-seventh Niwano Peace Prize today.

It is a great honor for the Niwano Peace Foundation to present the Niwano Peace Prize this year to Ms. Ela Ramesh Bhatt, the founder of India's Self-Employed Women's Association, or SEWA.

The pamphlets you hold offer a partial introduction to Ms. Bhatt, who has held a number of important positions in India, such as member of the upper house of the Parliament of India and a member of the national Planning Commission. She also plays important roles in international institutions. She has received countless awards, starting with the Ramon Magsaysay Award, as well as many honorary degrees from universities. She is also the author of numerous books. It is no exaggeration to say that she is one of the most respected women in the world.

Ms. Bhatt is four years older than me, but her energetic lifestyle completely belies her age. It is very encouraging for someone like myself of more or less the same generation.

I would like once again to express my deep appreciation for her coming, as busy as she is, all the way to Tokyo.

As mentioned in the introduction a little earlier, Ms. Bhatt has devoted her entire life to improving the lives of India's poorest and most oppressed women workers. Her activities take on a wide variety of forms, but they all have several distinguishing features in common.

The first distinguishing feature is that SEWA's activities are carried out in the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi.

My understanding is that this spirit centers on nonviolence, respect for all religions, truthfulness, and love and reverence for all people.

Although I'm a Buddhist, I identify deeply with the spirit of Gandhi.

Shakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism, is said to have taken seven steps as soon as he was born and, pointing his right hand to the sky and his left hand to the ground, to have

proclaimed, “I alone am honored, in heaven and on earth.” Although he said he alone was honored, we have been taught that his true meaning is that every individual is precious. I believe this conviction to be the basis of nonviolence, respect for all religions, truthfulness, and love and reverence for all people.

Ms. Bhatt’s activities over many years have been imbued with boundless love and compassion rooted in a deeply religious spirit. That is precisely why SEWA has more than a million members and continues to grow.

The second distinguishing feature of SEWA is that it does not only give needy and oppressed women material things and funds. Rather, its goal is to make them spiritually, economically, and socially self-reliant. Ms. Bhatt has helped these socially marginalized women achieve honorable status as self-employed women workers, a status reflected in the name of her organization. Instead of being simply perceived as powerless, each one of them is given respect.

Helping women achieve self-reliance could not have been at all easy in a society that clings to old ways. Starting with a labor union, and then a banking business, health care and childcare, housing, social security, and agricultural development—it must have seemed like an extremely long path to accomplish all this. I am told that along the way Ms. Bhatt encountered no little criticism, defamation, and harassment.

In the midst of all this, Ms. Bhatt did not attack women’s oppressors; instead she put her strength into helping women overcome discrimination and oppression through spiritual, economic, and social self-reliance. She has followed the path she believes in, a step at a time, and now she has the understanding and support of the majority of her fellow citizens and even those who had opposed her. Ms. Bhatt’s experiment has been highly esteemed in all countries of the world as a model for building self-reliance, and it has been the center of much attention.

The third distinguishing feature of SEWA offers an extremely important perspective in considering the world’s future. That perspective is the conviction that women will play a crucial role in the shaping of a peaceful society.

Ms. Bhatt says, “Women are the key that constitutes a society. It is the women that nurture the foundation of the family and work to build a stable society. Women are the ones who strengthen and create bonds, and they are protectors. They also bring constructive, creative, and sustainable solutions to the world.”

Moreover, Gandhi said that if nonviolence is a doctrine that mankind must follow, certainly it is women who alone are in the position to be the creators of the future.

Some people say that most of the many problems in today's society stem from masculine, paternal traits, such as efficiency, productivity, rationality, self-assertion, and competition.

They point out that, on the other hand, feminine, maternal traits, such as tenderness, warmth, sympathy, cooperativeness, and sharing, are the starting points for raising children to be people of integrity and achieving world peace.

Of course, paternal and maternal qualities cross genders and shape the attitudes of individuals. Furthermore, the value of paternal traits of efficiency, productivity, and rationality are not limited to gender and cannot be denied altogether. It's important to cultivate a balance between paternal and maternal traits.

Looking back upon history, however, we can see that in fact we have gone too far in the direction of a male-dominated society with paternal values.

Ms. Bhatt has said, "Women must become the leaders for social change." These words are important advice not only for the people of India but for people in all countries of the world, and I think they will probably become key words as the way is opened to a new generation.

I have been able, through this presentation of the twenty-seventh Niwano Peace Prize to Ms. Bhatt, to learn anew about the conditions women face in India. At the same time this offers us an opportunity to reexamine our Japanese way of life.

We cannot draw a simple comparison between Japan and India. In Japan, as well, some people face difficulties. Most Japanese, however, are enjoying a period of well-being and prosperity. In spite of this, however, they are increasingly discontented rather than grateful for their good fortune, and it may be that in reality they are causing their own pain.

Zen Buddhism has the saying "All I know is what is enough." We, too, feel very strongly that we should aim for spiritual, economic, and social "self-reliance" in the truest sense.

SEWA was founded thirty-eight years ago. Ms. Bhatt says her work is still in progress. I hope that the number of her followers will continue to multiply and that there will be an ever-growing surge of women creating a peaceful society.

I expect that the occasion of today's presentation ceremony will spur even more

people to share the desires and actions of Ms. Bhatt. With prayers that she will long continue her great work, I offer my greetings.

Thank you all very much.