

Speech - CISED seventh anniversary- 19 08 08

Namaskara, thank you, and I am very conscious that Sharad has cautioned me that I have only five minutes to speak.

Way back in 1973, when I was in the ninth std in St Columba School in Mumbai, my friend, and the “brain” of the class, Smita - and I used to eat a quick lunch and meet in the lovely wood paneled library in our Scottish missionary founded school, to discuss ideas that would change the world. Which, I suspect was the right occupation of mind for a 13 year old and less legitimate perhaps at my age now, nearing fifty! Yet how little we learn.

And as we were animatedly talking, I noticed a stray hair that had wrapped itself around the armrest of my chair. I absent- mindedly pulled at it, thinking I would throw it aside. And I heard a shriek – “Hey,” and in that split second I remembered that Ms Brain also boasted the longest ever hair, almost up to her knees, but always neatly braided in to two plaits. “Hey,” screamed a pained Smita, “that’s attached!”

It’s funny, is it not, how long that memory has stayed with me, and how it has come back to me today?

Anyway, that memory led me to think then of one of my favourite quotations, which I have used in other speeches as well, from John Muir, the founder of the Sierra Club, who exhorted Americans to save their forests and parks, and which led, among other things, to the conservation of Yosemite, and who once said, “When one tugs at a single thing in nature, one finds it attached to the rest of the world.”

And it seems to me that this really echoes our situation and our emerging understanding at this stage of the era of climate change and more. And to me, it also echoes so much of the spiritual tradition of this sub-continent, which, with its rich history, is a world in itself.

In any case, it leads me to suggest that one of the reasons I believe in CISED’s work and especially in its interdisciplinary approach is that it helps make visible the many intertwined and almost invisible threads, like Smita’s hair, that bind us, that weave un noticed between our own actions and their diverse outcomes and results, separated in both time and space. And I hope they can do more. Because It is very important that this work should sometimes make us, like Smita, cry out – “Hey, that’s attached”.

For direct example, when CISED research reveals that perhaps the disruption of upstream forests is immediately beneficial to water flows downstream, or that nuclear energy and safety engineering have unknowable economic complexities, it makes me stop and think in the work I do, whether in my work in water, or in my philanthropy.

And CISED , no doubt, will have many examples of how their work moves seamlessly from lab to land, from land to lab and from both into policy and practice.

And to come to the purpose of this event, I will say that CISED and institutions like it, which are precious few in India right now, and, as earlier speakers have mentioned, need to be expanded both in numbers and in size and scope, can survive on only three models I can think of – or a combination thereof –

- State support
- Contracted research, paid research
- Philanthropy.

On my part, I have been able to action a little bit of philanthropy. Going forward, my job is to ensure that a lot of people know about the organizations I support, working for environmental issues, especially CISED, with its inter disciplinary approach. And to reach out, best as I can, to the increasing numbers of the seriously wealthy in India, so that they will reach deep into their pockets to make it ever more possible to unravel the fine web of threads that bind us all.

Thank you, namaskara.