



## Climate Change and Modern Slavery: An Overview of India

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*#MayorsCare Summit on*

*Modern Slavery and Climate Change: The Commitment of the Cities*

New Synod Hall, 21 July 2015

Tony Chammany – Mayor of Kochi

Your Eminences,

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

And My Dear Friends. . . .

Giving all praise and honour to God.

Let me, first of all, say how deeply blessed I am to be here, invited by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. It is especially an honour to be in the New Synod Hall, in the midst of the splendid Vatican Gardens. I am grateful for this invitation, and applaud Holy Father Pope Francis' humanitarian vision.

We are gathered here today to discuss one of His Holiness' priorities and one of the major challenges faced by communities and nations: Climate Change and Modern Slavery.

Dear Friends,

Let me begin my talk by quoting Mahatma Gandhi: *“Earth provides enough to satisfy everyman's needs but not everyman's greed”*. This prophetic line speaks volumes about the environmental and social disaster that is looming large on our planet.

It is widely agreed that climate change is likely to be accompanied by increased climate variability and by an increased risk of extreme events and surprises. “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, day and night, shall not cease”, says, chapter 8 of the Genesis in the Holy Bible.

Coming to the Indian Context, it is reported that this year will be a drought year as rainfall is well below 90%, which will affect the farmers who have faced five consecutive crop failures – either due to too little or too much rain. In situations like these, rural farmers are unable to find financial resources to support the needs of their household pushing them into the dark dungeons of “slavery”.

Adverse living conditions in rural areas force people to leave their homes to find a job in urban areas; lack of education and skill make them vulnerable to exploitation. For daily wage workers, slums provide them with low-cost accommodation and food, in cities where housing has become unaffordable.

Thus, when we examine the grass root level of aspects like slums, housing issues, lack of education, the cause boils down to poverty in rural areas, a result of unfavourable climatic and social conditions. The Bhagavad Gita, the holy scripture of the Hindu religion, gives a clear direction on man-environment relationship and the need of giving back to nature by everyone. “For, so sustained by sacrifice, the gods will give you the food of your desire. Whoso enjoys their gift, yet gives nothing, is a thief, no more nor less”.

The negative socio-economic condition of the population is nothing but an aftermath of this human-induced environmental degradation, coupled with the depriving hierarchical social system based on one's birth. The urge to conquer, dominate and enslave fellow humans, all other species and Nature itself has been a defining quality of man through the ages. The forms and systems of enslavement have differed in place and time.

My country had one of the worst forms of slavery known to man – the Caste system. It is an enslavement of the Heart and Mind, build into the culture and governance system over centuries. The vast majority was made to believe that to be subjugated is sacred and good. Gandhiji taught us that the struggle for freedom was not only against foreign rule, but also for liberation from the stranglehold of caste and all forms of oppression.

In a nutshell, all elements of Modern Slavery, including bonded labour, child slavery, early and forced marriages, forced labour, descent-based slavery, prostitution and trafficking are vogue in this social milieu. One of the surveys conducted in the recent past shows that India has most slaves in the world.

Nevertheless, India has promulgated a number of key laws relevant to modern slavery. The Right to Education Act – whereby the authorities are required to ensure all children of school-going age are in school – is important, as is the Integrated Child Protection Scheme, which is making a real difference. Under the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, bonded labour has been criminalized in India.

In 2005 the Government of India introduced a revolutionary law named “Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act”, which guaranteed the “right to work” ensuring 100 days of wage employment for every household, changing the socio-economic conditions of rural India.

There are many institutions and individuals who have been advocating the cause of the marginalized, the modern slaves, of the Indian Society and their efforts are making real changes. This year’s Nobel Peace Laureate, Kailash Sathyarthy, is one among them, who leads a movement to end child slavery and exploitative child labour. Beneath the dark clouds we begin to see rays of hope. I am sure things will change for the better, sooner than later.

The City of Kochi is in the State of Kerala and the state lies in the South-Western corner of the country. The socio-economic condition of the state is quite different from the rest of the country owing to the geographical settings and progressive outlook of the people of the state. The serious issue affecting the city is the global projections of climate change which indicate that the globally averaged sea level will rise significantly by the middle of the century, perhaps as much as 0.9 meters. While the city area averages only 1.5 meters above mean sea level, this change is going to pose a big threat to the very survival of the city.

Being one of the fastest growing urban centres in India, the city witnessed a large influx of migration in recent times, mainly unskilled labourers, mostly from other states of India. The condition of this population is pathetic, owing to the pitiable living condition provided to them by their overexploiting job providers.

In short, all sorts of modern slavery exist though much lower when compared to national average, in this otherwise modern and socially coherent forward-looking urban centre. Addressing these phenomena, climate change and modern slavery, is a herculean task for us as city administrators.

Understanding climate change and its impacts is not always easy; talking about it, even less. Unfamiliar technical terms, abstract concepts, difficulty to relate to discussions happening at a global and far-away level make it difficult to understand what kind of consequences climate change will concretely have on your city and your citizens. In addition, very often the people who are most affected by the impacts of climate change are those with the least access to information on what is happening and how they can adapt to it. So is the case with modern slavery.

This workshop on modern slavery and climate change which brings together cities across the globe to discuss these issues has come as a very good platform for a city like Kochi, which at present is trying to address both these issues on a war footing, devising many projects and programmes. The encyclical of His Holiness has generated worldwide attention to these issues. Our cities will have to commit themselves to addressing these biggest challenges of our time. I am sure this workshop, which calls upon the active contribution of local governments in their fight against both climate change and modern slavery, will be able to give cities and nations proper direction and orientation in addressing them.

I firmly believe that it is difficult to bring about change singlehandedly, but together we could take strong steps forward to fight modern slavery and climate change. I am sure the desired objective of this workshop, which is to put moral pressure on the UN to make sure that the New Sustainable Development Goals will give enough priority in treating modern slavery and human trafficking as a crime against humanity, will be attained by our collective efforts.

Scientific data and facts have made it clear that it is the sum total of the individual actions of the 7 billion people on the planet that collectively impact climate change. Hence, any and every effort to undo the damage has to start from the bottom, the villages and the Cities where all human actions take place. Modernism, driven by naked greed, wrong priorities and socially misleading advertising is taking the planet to the point of no return. Coastal cities like Cochin are already facing the effects of sea level rise and change in the monsoon pattern. Coping with this is a phenomenal task. Mankind has the resources to take on the challenge and I am supremely confident that we can. The religions of the world that hold sway over the hearts and minds of men, global bodies like the UN, and Governments should sit down and draw up action plans which should be backed by sustainable mechanisms and funding. Local Governments can convert them into action on the ground. The word has to go out. It is now or never! There may not be a replay!

Let me conclude by extending my heartfelt gratitude to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences for inviting me to be part of such an important and relevant symposium and workshop. A word of gratitude is also due to Amma Mata

Amritanandamayi, a spiritual leader from India, who was also a signatory of the *Joint Declaration of Religious Leaders against Modern Slavery* along with His Holiness and other important world religious leaders.

Before this august audience let me once again reiterate the commitment of the city of Kochi in addressing all issues pertaining to Climate Change and Modern Slavery and also our commitment to join institutions and individuals who work to espouse this cause.

Thank you for listening. Thank you all.