Speaker: Maya Ranavare

Global Appeal 2025 to End Stigma and Discrimination Against Persons Affected by Leprosy

Good [morning/afternoon], distinguished guests, ladies, and gentlemen,

My name is Maya Ranavare, and I am a woman affected by leprosy from Maharashtra my parents are also the same. I am deeply honoured to be here today and extend my heartfelt gratitude to SHF for providing me and my fellow brothers and sisters from the leprosy community across India with this incredible platform to voice our struggles, hopes, and aspirations.

The theme of today's meeting is critical: ending stigma and discrimination against persons affected by leprosy. Unfortunately, despite advancements in medicine and technology, leprosy-related stigma continues to persist at both public and private levels, particularly in grassroots communities. Illiteracy, lack of awareness, and entrenched misconceptions about the disease have created barriers that deny us our dignity, isolate us from society, and hinder our progress.

Leprosy stigma affects every facet of life—social status, employment opportunities, education, marriage, and even access to basic amenities. Many of us have experienced mental anguish, loneliness, and a sense of alienation from loved ones and mainstream society. Even today, individuals affected by leprosy face discrimination in places as varied as homes, schools, hospitals, temples, markets, and public transport. Many are forced to live in leprosy colonies under challenging conditions, cut off from opportunities and hope.

One of the biggest hurdles we face is the lack of awareness about early detection and treatment. Misconceptions about the transmission of leprosy perpetuate fear and stigma, often delaying diagnosis and increasing the risk of transmission. Poor access to healthcare facilities and diagnostic tools in remote areas further compounds the problem.

To break this vicious cycle, it is essential to foster awareness and education. Local leaders, traditional healers, and former patients—our "Leprosy Champions"—can play a vital role in spreading the message that leprosy is treatable and not a curse or a punishment but also about all types of Negleted Tyipical Diseases. Through accurate information and timely intervention, we can reduce stigma and encourage early health-seeking behaviour.

We have already seen positive changes in our communities. Some individuals have moved away from dependence on begging and embraced self-employment. Children affected by leprosy are now receiving education and vocational training for a brighter future. Women are forming self-help groups, and youth forums are improving networking and advocacy skills. With support from the government and NGOs, people are receiving proper treatment, footwear, and better infrastructure for leprosy colonies.

But there is still so much more to be done. Counseling and follow-up support during and after treatment are vital to empowering patients and ensuring their successful reintegration into society. Together, we must create an environment where no one feels excluded or inferior because of leprosy.

As we gather here today, let us reaffirm our commitment to ending leprosy-related stigma and discrimination globally. By fostering inclusion, raising awareness, and providing access to healthcare and opportunities, we can work toward a future where no one affected by leprosy is left behind.

Thank you.