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**Education, that is equitable, easily accessible and provides equal opportunities - is the sine qua non for development:
Vice President**

**Inaugurates Conference on Factors of Poor learning: Challenges, Opportunities and Practices for Learning
Improvement in Socially Diverse Elementary Schools of India**

The Vice President of India, Shri M. Hamid Ansari has said that the education, that is equitable, easily accessible and provides equal opportunities – is the sine qua non for development and it would determine the future shape of our society and polity. He was addressing the gathering, here today, after inaugurating a Conference on ‘Factors of Poor learning: Challenges, Opportunities and Practices for Learning Improvement in Socially Diverse Elementary Schools of India’ organized by Deshkal Society, Delhi.

The Vice President said that the power of education extends beyond the development of skills we need for economic success, it is an essential condition for political development, democracy and social justice. With the coming into force of the Right to Education Act, we have made substantial gains in spread of elementary education, but a critical appraisal of the elementary education scenario reveals that large gaps in implementation, he added.

The Vice President said that there is great disparity between urban and rural education, and children from different social and geographic backgrounds have radically different schooling experiences. Referring to the Government’s reply to a question in the Parliament, the Vice President said that some 6.064 million children remained out of school, of which, a massive 4.6 million or 76% belonged to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other religious minorities.

The Vice President said that several independent civil society organizations have flagged that the present education system, especially in rural areas, is not creating a heterogeneous environment for inclusive education to cater to the educational needs of socially backward communities. He further said that serious issues, such as, low literacy rates, poor enrolment rates, high dropouts, high infant mortality of children from socially and economically weaker segments of the society remain un-addressed. An effort is being made to address some of these lacunae, and issues of gender, social, cultural and regional disparities, with an emphasis on diversity, will be properly addressed in the curriculum that will also cover issues of social justice and harmony and legal measures in order to avoid social discrimination, he added.

Following is the text of Vice President’s address:

“The subject of today’s discussion, focusing on factors of poor learning, has serious ramifications for the making of an egalitarian society. I am therefore happy to join you today to understand its dimensions and implications.

The Preamble of our Constitution and its sections on Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles represent a national consensus on the society we wish to create. These stipulate a polity based on the principles of secularism, Socialism and democracy, seeking social, economic and political justice, providing for liberty of thought, expression, believe, faith and worship, equality of status and opportunity, and based on fraternity assuring the dignity of individuals and unity of nation.

How is this to be achieved?

The American philosopher educationist John Dewey observed, “*Education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform. This it does in two ways; by guiding children towards new values and by assisting the development of intelligence in individual children and increasing society’s potential for its own transformation.*” Much the same was said by Nelson Mandela when he observed that ‘*Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.*’

The power of education extends beyond the development of skills we need for economic success. It is more than rote knowledge, must create the capacity to think, and is an essential condition for political development, democracy and social justice.

This is well understood in our country. As far back as 1966, the Education Commission had observed that ‘*realization of our country’s aspiration involves change in the knowledge, skills, interests and values of the people as a whole*’. It had pointed out that ‘*if this change on a grander scale is to be achieved without violent revolution, there is one instrument, and one instrument only that can be used- education.*’ Other agencies may help, and can indeed sometimes have a more apparent impact. But the national system of education is the only instrument that can reach all the people.

It was with this lofty objective that the Constitution was amended to insert a new Article, 21 A, which made elementary education a Fundamental Right. We also adopted a policy of positive discrimination or affirmative action by reserving seats in educational institutions for socially and economically weaker segments.

The cornerstone of Right to Education (RTE) is provision of free and compulsory elementary education, though the aim is also to provide increasing access to learning opportunities at secondary, technical and higher levels.

In the last decade, especially with the coming into force of the Right to Education Act, we have made substantial gains in spread of elementary education. Let me list some of these:

- Some 3.5 lakh schools have been opened since 2006 and 99% of India's rural population now have a primary school within a one kilometre radius.
- A survey in 2014 reported that 84.4% elementary schools now served the mid-day meals, 48.2% had proper and functioning toilets for girls and 73% schools had available drinking water.
- The enrolment of girls has increased slightly from 48.12% in 2009-10 to 48.19% in 2014-15 at the elementary level. For boys, the enrollment at primary level is now 52%.
- A 55% decline in dropouts was also reported in the age group 6–14 years, between 2005 and 2014.

Despite these significant gains, a critical appraisal of the elementary education scenario reveals that large gaps in implementation. India still has the largest number of out-of-school children in the world, which is more than the out of school children in whole of sub-Saharan Africa.

There is great disparity between urban and rural education, and children from different social and geographic backgrounds have radically different schooling experiences. Allow me to cite some aspects:

1. Answering a question in the Rajya Sabha, on 10th March 2016, the Minister for HRD said that in 2014, some 6.064 million children remained out of school. Of these, a massive 4.6 million or 76% belonged to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other religious minorities.
2. The recent Report of the Committee for the Evolution of the New Educational Policy, set up by the HRD Ministry, states that while the gross Enrolment Ratio in elementary education is satisfactorily high, "the quality in terms of learning outcomes is undeniably poor." It cites as evidence the ASER 2014 Report. One cause, it states, is "teacher absenteeism estimated at over 25% every day."
3. Another HRD Ministry document observes that "though India has made significant progress in terms of enhancing access to and participation in all levels of education, the overall picture of education development in the country is mixed and there are many persisting concerns and challenges relating to access to and participation in education, quality of the education imparted, equity in education, system efficiency, governance and management, research and development, and financial commitment to education development".
4. Despite all the governmental and societal effort, the overall literacy rate in 2011 was 73%, with a noticeable gap between male literacy at 80.9% and female literacy at 64.8%.
5. If the SC, ST and religious minority children comprise 76% of those out of school, the levels of literacy among them cannot but be reflective of this state of affairs. In regard to the largest religious minority children, the 2006 Sachar Committee Report had observed that only 17% of them above the age of 17 were found to have completed matriculation as compared to the general average of 26%.
6. Another report, in 2013, found that the level of matriculation education among Muslims both in rural and urban areas is lower than even SCs and STs. This is also evident in higher education.
7. The Global Monitoring Report 2012 ranked India a low 102 out of the 120 countries on the Education for All (EFA) Development Index, based on progress in universal primary education, adult literacy, gender parity and the quality of education.
8. Some surveys reveal that while enrolment in elementary education has increased, there has been a decline in the education outcomes, with abilities in reading, writing and other comprehensive skills deteriorating among children between the ages of 6 and 14. For instance, according to the ASER 2014 Report, only a fourth of all children in standard III could read a standard II text fluently, a drop of more than 5% over five years.

Several independent civil society organizations have flagged that the present education system, especially in rural areas, is not creating a heterogeneous environment for inclusive education to cater to the educational needs of socially backward

communities. Education level of Scheduled Tribes children, for example, remains a matter of grave concern. Serious issues, such as, low literacy rates, poor enrolment rates, high dropouts, high infant mortality of children from socially and economically weaker segments of the society remain un-addressed.

An effort is being made to address some of these lacunae, as indicated in a 2014 Assessment Report and in the recently released document providing the direction and inputs for a new National Education policy with the promise that address issues of gender, social, cultural and regional disparities, with an emphasis on diversity, will be properly addressed in the curriculum that will also cover issues of social justice and harmony and legal measures in order to avoid social discrimination. Discussion on the document is in the public domain; the final shape of policy is awaited.

Education is a liberating and democratizing force. It is an enabler, which cuts across the barriers of caste and class, smoothing out inequalities imposed by birth and other circumstances. It ensures mobility and can redefine the social structure.

Education, that is equitable, easily accessible and provides equal opportunities – is the *sine qua non* for development. It would determine the future shape of our society and polity.

I thank the organizers of this Conference for inviting me here today and wish you successful deliberations.

Jai Hind.”

KSD/BK