

“Sisters and brothers,

I am glad to be here amongst this galaxy of eminent academicians on the occasion of the prestigious Nehru and Tagore Literacy Awards Ceremony. I congratulate the Indian Adult Education Association for conferring the Nehru Literacy Award since 1966 and Tagore Literacy Award since 1987 to individuals and institutions that have made noteworthy contribution to the field of education and national development. Conferred in the name of two great sons of India, these awards will inspire millions of our countrymen in the years to come to do their best to serve humanity by lighting the lamp of knowledge.

I also congratulate the recipients of these awards – Prof. P. Adinarayana Reddy, Dr. Anita Dighe and Smt. Nishat Farooq for their outstanding contribution to nation building.

The importance of literacy and education needs no emphasis. When the world is moving towards becoming a knowledge-centric society, literacy and education have become the most critical instruments of development. Modernization, urbanization, communication, commercialisation, and digitalisation, among other things, have become essential aspects of the world today. Individuals and institutions need to adapt themselves accordingly to sustain against this growing pressure. This is also necessary for understanding the socio-economic and cultural context so that you can orient yourself in tune with changing times.

As we are aware, high rates of literacy and educational attainment are directly related to a country's economic progress and the quality of life of its citizens. In a developing country like India, literacy is even more important as it helps in better implementation and outcome of various developmental programs such as population control, health and hygiene, environment protection, women's empowerment and upliftment of deprived sections of society. Literacy is also a precondition for skill education and human resource development.

Today, we are living in a time when reading and writing skills have become more essential than ever before. These skills not only instill confidence in a person but also help in making one's social life more active and dignified.

Dear Friends,

Over the past seven decades, we have made significant strides in the field of education. However, there still exists a huge imbalance in basic literacy skills in our society. We have a large number of well-equipped schools, colleges and universities and the number is constantly rising. But we still have a long way to go and need to work hard to make everyone literate.

As per the Report on United Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+), the Gross Enrolment Ratio at Elementary Level has reached 97.8% in India in the year 2019-20. What is even more heartwarming is that the Gross Enrolment Ratio for girl students at Elementary Level is even higher at 98.7 %. Today, the total number of girls, enrolled from primary to higher secondary level, is more than 12.08 crore. This is a welcome trend and I compliment all stakeholders at Centre and States who worked hard to make this possible.

Though we have attained near universal literacy among children, India's overall literacy rate stands at 73% only as per the 2011 Census. This huge gap indicates that a large part of our adult population is unable to read or write, which in turn, significantly hampers their ability to realize their goals and aspirations. It is really disappointing to note that India has the largest number of illiterate people in the world. There is an urgent need to correct the course in this context.

Dear friends,

The Constitution of India promises equal opportunities for all and the government with the motto of "sabka saath, sabka vikas, sab ka vishwaas", is making every possible effort to eliminate illiteracy and poverty. The New Education Policy 2020 brings a paradigm shift in our education system. This has been developed to fulfill the aspirations of millions of citizens while realizing the Sustainable Development Goals- 2030. Goal number four of SDG

2030 seeks to ensure "quality and inclusive education for all and to foster lifelong learning opportunities" which is also reflected in the New Education Policy 2020.

This policy also gives due emphasis to the importance of various aspects of adult education. It proclaims the right to get elementary education and outlines the idea that the opportunity to get a livelihood is important for all citizens. This approach opens new vistas of growth and development through availing lifelong opportunities of socio-economic and cultural development. It is an accepted fact that literacy helps in deepening the impact of other schemes implemented by the government and spurs GDP growth.

The New Education Policy not only focuses on providing quality education but also seeks to develop character, inculcate scientific temper, promote creativity, the spirit of service and equip students with the capabilities to meet 21st-century challenges. It recommends multiple avenues including crowd funding and utilizing online and app-based technology, satellite based television channels, online study resources and libraries for the development and promotion of adult education centers.

I am happy to note that the Indian Adult Education Association is doing excellent work for realizing the ethos and targets of the New Education Policy.

Dear friends,

A lot has to be done for a qualitative change in the educational arena. We need to move forward from universal functional literacy to skill education and lifelong learning. The Government of India has already started a number of programmes like Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, Skill India, Mudra Yojna and Start Up India, among others, for skilling and gainful employment opportunities. I urge all stakeholders, including the private sector, to come forward and supplement the government's work in the field of adult education and skills training. We must go beyond simple literacy and focus our attention on increasing digital literacy and financial literacy among the masses. It is my appeal to every educated youth to come forward and teach at least one person from their localities or communities how to write and, how to operate digital devices and how to avail themselves of benefits of government schemes. Like CSR, I call it your PSR – Personal Social Responsibility.

Active participation of organizations like Indian Adult Education Association is certainly essential for bringing rapid changes in teaching India's adult population. Working for the last 80 years, IAEA has played an important role in nation building and I am certain that it will continue to do so with the same dedication and firmness.

I congratulate the recipients of prestigious Nehru and Tagore Literacy awards and wish that they continue with their work to realize the vision of a 'Shikshit aur Samarth Bharat' – an Educated and Empowered India.

For Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, independence was like an abode "where the mind is without fear and the head is held high, where knowledge is free".

Dear friends,

Literacy and education liberate people. They serve as the basic instruments of change and progress.

As we celebrate 'Azadi ka Amrut Mahotsav' in the 75th year of our Independence, let us resolve to make our nation fully literate and educated. As I always assert, let us make India a 'Vishwa Guru' once again.

Once again I extend congratulations to IAEA and the recipients of awards for their commendable work.

Thank you.

Jai Hind!"