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**Sign Bilingualism Provide Solutions to Challenges Which are being Faced by the Persons  
with Hearing Impairment Says Minister for Social Justice**

The Conference on “Sign Bilingualism is a Human Right” organized by the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) as a part of International Week of the Deaf as announced by the World Federation of the Deaf was organized here today. Appreciating the initiative of National Association of the Deaf the Minister for Social Justice & Empowerment, Shri Mukul Wasnik said, “conferences like this are very important to bring in innovative ideas to support the inclusion of persons with hearing impairment in the society so that they enjoy equal rights in all aspects of life. I am sure that this conference will certainly provide us an opportunity to understand the Sign Bilingualism in a right perspective and provide solutions to challenges which are being faced by the persons with hearing impairment.

In India, as per 2001 census, the population with hearing impairment was over 12 Lakhs and as per 58th round of NSSO the hearing impaired population was over 30 Lakhs. The number is likely to go up as per Census 2011. A significant number of deaf persons essentially depend on Sign Language for communication. Even though it is in use for over hundred years, the efforts to understand and study the Sign Language have been limited.

Deaf people principally depend on sign language for understanding the concepts; this is same for the students too. But, the quality of education given to our deaf children has been poor because of the limited number of teachers available in sign language. And also our society has yet to understand the cultural and linguistic needs of the deaf community. It has been seen that deaf children learn best in sign language. A sign bilingual child is the one who uses two or more languages in their daily life, at least one of which is a sign language. Sign bilingualism is based on the idea that, deaf children can potentially easily acquire sign language and may have difficulty in accessing spoken language, they should be given the opportunity to develop sign language. This gives them a foundation of having a full command of one language. This foundation helps learn another language better. While working towards the same goals as spoken language based approaches, sign bilingualism recognizes the need for a different classroom practice, using different means to achieve the same ends. A sign bilingual approach encourages the involvement of deaf as well as hearing people, and recognition of the culture of Deaf people. Bilingual education has shown good results with increased literacy level and supports learning and communication environment of a deaf child.

For the deaf people, barriers to access lie more in lack of accessible information, whether this information comes through direct interaction with other people, who do not use sign

language or from other sources like the mass media, documents and so forth. The Sign bilingual education makes the accessibility for deaf people a reality. Without accessibility, deaf people will be isolated. Thus, the full enjoyment of rights for deaf people is possible only with the recognition and development of sign language. It is the natural language for them and they learn sign language easily. Armed with sign language, they feel empowered and are used for communication, learning and eventually getting a wage employment. By this we will be able to achieve the fundamental human right of everyone including the deaf people that is life with dignity. This will eventually enable them to exercise civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights on an equal basis with everyone else.

For this is to become a reality we need to produce quality sign language teachers. It is not enough to have enough teachers; we have to have sign language interpreters as well. Without the interpreters, it will become impossible for the sign language dependent persons to access public services such as education, health, telecommunications, information/media, transport, etc. Therefore, there is need for trained sign language interpreters who are currently in limited number. I am told that there is need for about 9000 interpreters in the country; while there are only about 30 RCI certified sign language Interpreters available. It is with this concern in mind that the Ministry has set up Indian Sign Language Research and Training Centre as an autonomous institution under IGNOU, New Delhi. The centre is the realization of the long cherished dream of the deaf community in India. It is an exclusive education project for teaching, learning, training and capacity building for the vast deaf population. I am confident that Indian Sign Language Research and Training Centre would change this scenario for the better in coming years.

As you know, the government has taken various measures to protect the rights of Persons with Disabilities. In a bid to provide inclusive education and to end discrimination against children with disabilities, the Government through its legislation, the Right to Education Act, has ensured the right to education to every child, irrespective of its class, sex, religion, disability or otherwise. Sarva Siksha Abhiyan(SSA) which is a vehicle for this purpose, ensures support to children with disabilities through the resource teachers, teacher aides and home based education. In some states Home Based Education (HBE) which prepares the child for the inclusive school is also provided. Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 look into the various types of disabilities and their empowerment. We are in the process of harmonizing the act with the UNCRPD. I am glad to share with you that we have created a new Department of Disability Affairs under our Ministry. With the setting up of a new Department, exclusively for disability issues, we now hope to focus in better manner on the issues concerning with disabilities. We also have seven National Institutes looking after different disabilities and they are being developed as Centre's of Excellence. We are also working on the National Institute for Universal Design. Through ADIP scheme we provide assistance to purchase aids and appliances. DDRS and DDRC schemes look in to the overall development of the PwDs. We plan to introduce Rajiv Gandhi Fellowship Scheme for students with disabilities pursuing M Phil and PhD, which we hope to start soon. And we support the NGOs who are working for the empowerment of the PwDs.

Though we have taken several measures, still we have a long way to go in reaching each and every person with disability and empowering them. To reach the unreached we all have to put our hands together and work for their betterment. I urge our country men and the organizations such as National Association for the Deaf to put all out efforts in realizing an inclusive society. Over the years, the NAD has made every effort to ensure that all deaf people in the country have access to the advice, opportunities and support, which will enable them to exercise their right to be full and active members of society. The need is unquestionable as we have to reach out to hundreds of thousands of deaf people and the government recognizes to accelerate and expand this work and make even more significant and lasting difference in the lives of deaf people throughout the country. I appreciate the efforts being made by NAD in organizing this conference on sign bilingualism.

Present on the occasion were Smt. Stuti Kacker, Secretary , Department of Disability Affairs, Dr. J. P. Singh, Member Secretary, Rehabilitation Council of India, Dr Madan Vashishta, Chief Advisor, Indian Sign Language Research and Training Centre, Shri A S Narayanan, Secretary, National Association of the Deaf.

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