

## **UPA Chairperson Inaugurates “SAMARTH 2014: Celebrating Diversity”**

Smt. Sonia Gandhi, Chairperson, United Progressive Alliance, inaugurated “SAMARTH 2014: Celebrating Diversity” organized by the Department of Disability Affairs, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment here today.

Speaking at the inaugural function Smt. Gandhi said that this event will help in creating awareness about the abilities of persons with disabilities and will go a long way in engendering an inclusive & enabling environment for them.

Smt. Gandhi said there is a need to link the issues of the disabled with the mainstream of the society and the government and make their development a key component of policies.

Smt. Gandhi further added that it was felt initially that disability was a medical problem and that it had to be dealt only by doctors. Today, the medical model has been replaced by the developmental and sociological model. “The disabled persons should not be kept aloof from the society. We will have to ensure that they make their place within the mainstream of the society and become its integral part.”

The UPA Chairperson also said that the Disability Act of 1995 is being amended to meet the norms of the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. The Union Cabinet has given its nod to the amendments and the Government will be able to pass it in the next session.

In December last year, the Union Cabinet had approved the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill to replace the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunity Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act of 1995. The bill covers a variety of issues relating to the disabled persons such as physical, mental and multiple disabilities.

Welcoming Smt. Sonia Gandhi, the Minister of Social Justice & Empowerment, Kumari Selja expressed her gratitude and said that we are aware of your deep commitment to the upliftment and empowerment of persons with disabilities.

The Minister in her said that it is seen that people with disabilities have often been excluded from mainstream, instead their right to life with dignity is to be promoted and protected as they are an important human resource, and are a partner in nation-building.

Underlining the role of media in creating awareness on disability issues Kumari Selja said that the media is a very powerful tool - especially the print media, the film & television media and of course, the Internet which is coming on now in a big way. There is also an urgent need for a lot of films to portray the people with disabilities in the right light. Of course, there are films like Nache-Mayuri, Iqbal, Taare Zamin Par, Sparsh etc. who have sensitively dealt with disability related issues but they have been far and in between. It is time that the Small Screen also starts

programmes on disability related themes, as this will help in bringing disability right into the family space and help bring disability out of the closet into the open, thereby leading to greater acceptance of disability, which is the first step towards rehabilitation.

The Minister added that it has been our experience that persons with disabilities given proper support and right environment have excelled in various fields, like education, employment, art, painting, music and dance. If we look at people like Rajeev Bagga (hearing/speech impaired), a National Badminton Champion in the early 1990s, Garimella Subramaniam (visually impaired), a senior journalist with the Hindu, Prabha Shah (hearing/speech impaired), a painter/artist, Sudha Chandran (Orthopedically challenged), a dancer/actress, we are compelled to think differently. There is hope, there is ability, there are pathways that can take us forward, there are solutions that can help us break free of the stranglehold of challenges. Disability is thus a matter of culture, attitude and not physical impairment.

People with disabilities enrich our lives in ways we cannot begin to fathom and those of us lucky enough to be part of rehabilitation process have experienced positive changes that have been brought about in the lives of PwDs, their care-givers and society around.

The Minister concluding with a quote from Dr. Helen Keller, “Until the great mass of the people shall be filled with the sense of responsibility for each other’s welfare, social justice can never be attained”.

More than 280 participants with disabilities from all over India will perform in the various events organized, such as National Programme of Dance and Music in which 95 items will be presented, a day-long Film Festival of 21 films on 16th January on Disability related themes and 5 exhibitions titled Colours of Ability displaying 60 art works, 9 Abilympics Champions, 21 ‘Disabled Artisans and craftsman in action’, and products made by them along with enabling aids and assistive devices for PwDs.

Present on the occasion were Shri P. Balram Naik and Shri Manik Rao Gavit, Ministers of State for Social Justice & Empowerment, Shri Sudhir Bhargava, Secretary, Social Justice and Empowerment, Ms. Stuti Kacker, Secretary, Department of Disability Affairs, Shri Anoop Kumar Srivastava, Additional Secretary (SJE), Maj. General Ian Cardozo, Chairman, Rehabilitation Council of India, Shri Prasanna Kumar Pincha, Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, Ms Poonam Natrajan , Chairperson, National Trust and other senior official of the Ministry.

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