

Seminar on 'Right to Education: Actions Now' with Prof. Amartya Sen

New Delhi, 19 December 2007



Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen called for accountability in delivery of elementary education and public healthcare services, effective use of resources and co-operation with unions in these sectors. Speaking at a seminar on "Right to Education: Action Now", organized by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), The Aspen Institute India and Shiksha, Prof. Sen underlined the centrality of expansion of elementary education for sustainable and inclusive growth. He suggested deployment of more economic resources in education and better organization of public services. Prof. Sen said, "Resources generated from economic growth should be used for public services and public goods in general, rather than being absorbed only in private consumption." He also highlighted the issue of diversity.

He said we should ensure efficiency and accountability in delivery of public services through organizational reforms. Despite economic reforms, the slowness of progress on school education has been taking much longer to remedy." He observed there has been some reduction in the proportion of poverty-stricken people. But the process could have been much faster if growth achievements are combined with ways and means of more widespread sharing of economic opportunities.

Prof. Sen Said India has been catching up with China in life expectancy and infant mortality, but there is still a long way to go. Prof. Sen expressed concern at shocking incidence of absenteeism and neglect on the part of many teachers. He pointed out the poor state of school inspection system in India. To tackle these problems, he suggested positive collaboration with other social groups and particularly the unions of primary school teachers and health care workers.

Though Prof. Sen was all praise for democracy in India, he added, "Even though democracy can bring important benefits even in the absence of universal literacy, an

educated population can make even better use of democracy." He placed a premium on female literacy and said, "Female literacy can enhance women's voice in family affairs, reduce gender inequality and child mortality. He said, "The contribution of basic education to development is not confined to economic progress only, there are other rewards of schooling. Education can have powerful effects on quality of life.

Earlier, Mr Jamshyd Godrej, Chairman, Shiksha said, "The Idea behind Shiksha is to use e-learning instruments to impart education at primary and secondary levels. We have achieved a lot, but the absence of proper education system is failing us. We need to take a fresh look at this. We need inputs from all to make concrete progress in the field of education. CII has been making positive efforts to promote education."

Mr Gautam Thapar, Vice-Chairman, Aspen Institute India, said, "In the context of globalization, education is assumed greater meaning. The greatness of a nation should not be measured by its ranking in global economic order, but by its ability to provide quality education. If we don't address the issue of education, our demographic dividend may turn into demographic disaster." He added that the Aspen Institute India is ready to contribute to the promotion of education.

The day-long session was attended by 200 participants from Indian industry, NGOs, principals of various schools across the country, teachers and students. The session included an interactive session with Prof. Sen during which he dwelt on an array of issues. The participants discussed future course of action to improve elementary education in India.