

The Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh addressed the Inaugural Session of the Conference of State Ministers of Welfare and Social Justice on 16 June, 2011 – delivering the following speech:

“I am very happy to be in your midst today at the inaugural session of the Conference of State Ministers of Welfare, Social Justice and Empowerment. Ensuring equitable development of all sections of society, particularly the weaker sections is central to the Government’s agenda of inclusive growth.

The success of our work will be measured in how far we are able to bring succour to our sisters and brothers of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, Differently-Abled and Senior Citizens. Although successive governments have made progressive laws which protect the basic rights and dignity of those of us who are disadvantaged in one way or another, the real question is how to implement and enforce these laws effectively, and back them up with adequate amount of resources.

It is imperative that we implement the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955, and the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. We need to ensure that meetings of the Vigilance-cum-Monitoring Committees at the State and District levels are held regularly. I have written on this subject to all the Chief Ministers. I do hope that the State Welfare Ministers will solemnly implement the letter and spirit of these Acts. At the same time, I invite you to take full advantage of central assistance which is available for this purpose, and which includes setting up larger number of exclusive special courts for speedy trial of such offences.

One of the darkest blots on our development process is the fact that even after 64 years of independence, we still have the heinous practice of manual scavenging. Today, I would like you to pledge that this scourge will be eliminated from every corner of our country in the next six months. The conversion of dry latrines must be completed once and for all.

The Ministry of Home Affairs’ recent advisories that employing a person of Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe as a manual scavenger to carry human excreta would be punishable under Section 3 of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act is a strong and prohibitive instrument in your hands. I urge you to make full use of this.

The Post-Matric Scholarship Scheme for Scheduled Caste students was revised in July, 2010. Education, health-care and skill development are the three very important requisites of empowering disadvantaged sections of our community to rise in the development ladder. And therefore, great importance attaches to provision of scholarships to students coming from these categories of our citizens. The Centre will continue to bear the financial liability for the entire twelfth Five Year Plan period. The states’ share will become due only in the thirteenth Five Year Plan, i.e. in 2017. The Central Government has willingly undertaken this additional commitment in order to ensure that our Scheduled Caste children do have access to education of the requisite quality.

The State Governments must however, ensure that the benefits of the revised scheme not only reach the Scheduled Caste students but do so in a transparent manner. They should thereby be able to improve their participation in tertiary education, including technical and professional education. As a measure of transparency, the detailed schedule of payment of such scholarships to students must be placed in the public domain.

As (Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment) Mukul Wasnik has mentioned, we also propose to revise the income-ceiling in scholarship rates under the Post-Matric Scholarship Scheme for OBC students as well.

As you all know, the Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan is our strategic instrument to address the developmental gap between the Scheduled Castes and the general population. I know that States are trying to earmark funds under the Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan in proportion to their Scheduled Caste population. But how effective is the effort to convert outlays into outcomes? It clearly needs to be much more concerted and evident. State Governments must with all sincerity prepare and implement their Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan so that benefits actually go to those for whom they are truly intended. Convergence is imperative in augmenting the benefits which will bridge the present developmental gap faster and more effectively.

The central government has launched a pilot Centrally-Sponsored Scheme "Pradhan Mantri Adarsh Gram Yojana" in five States, namely, Assam, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu. This is for integrated development of 1000 villages with Scheduled Caste majority populations. Provided the pilot warrants, and encouraging results are achieved, an expansion of this scheme is being considered in the 12th Five-Year Plan.

Various initiatives are being taken to address concerns of persons with disabilities. But I do recognize that we have to do much more in this regard. The expert group of the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment is drafting a new law in place of the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995. After consulting State Governments and other stakeholders we propose to introduce the Bill in Parliament.

One of the continuing traumas of our disabled sisters and brothers is obtaining disability certificates. The Central Rules under the Persons with Disabilities Act have been amended in December, 2009 to enable the issue of certificates through a simple and decentralised institutional mechanism. I request that State Governments follow this template on a priority basis. This will to some extent, ameliorate the sufferings of differently-abled persons.

Steps have been taken to provide for the health-care, security and well-being of our senior citizens. But we need to do a lot more in this regard as well. We have increased tax and travel concessions for senior citizens. But as I said, much more needs to be done. We should use the services of Panchayats and Senior Citizens' Associations and other community-based groups to sensitize and re-orient the law enforcement machinery to the vulnerability and special protection needs of older persons.

In cooperation with the corporate sector, the UPA government has taken a number of initiatives to increase affirmative action with regard to employment of our weaker sections. Some of the results are encouraging. Several corporate houses have voluntarily adopted a code to ensure effective affirmative action. Ombudsmen have been appointed to ensure single point accountability. Nearly one lakh, twelve thousand youth have been trained under entrepreneurship development and other programmes. But here too, much more needs to be done.

We are also working together to ensure an annual voluntary disclosure mechanism. The government is planning to earmark a percentage of procurement from the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises which are run by those who are disadvantaged.

Friends, it is significant that this conference is being organised when we are on the threshold of formulating the Twelfth Five Year Plan. I request you all to review the progress made in these matters, which are of critical concern to our agenda of social justice. I would urge you to identify areas which are lacking attention and recommend what you see as the road ahead for the Twelfth Five Year Plan.

With these words, I wish the Conference all success.”