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**Address of Shri Kapil Sibal during the ‘General Policy Debate’ at the 36th Session of the General Conference of  
UNESCO**

Following is the text of the address by Shri Kapil Sibal, Minister of Human Resource Development, during the ‘General Policy Debate’ at the 36th Session of the General Conference of UNESCO on 28th October 2011:

“ We are at a critical juncture in history. The past is collapsing and the future uncertain. The shadow of an economic crisis in the developed world lingers. The aspirations of the marginalized and disempowered are on the rise. The centre of gravity of economic activity is shifting. Established global and financial structures are under challenge.

International organisations must recognise and reflect upon the realities of the contemporary world. We need a new vision, a fresh resolve. The ICT revolution has changed the dynamics of conversations and interactions of people within nations and beyond territorial boundaries. Technologies have connected people like never before. We need to re-define our roles and relationships within the global order.

Tomorrow’s youth will catalyse and be at the forefront of the change we badly need. But we need to empower them. We will fail our future generations if we do not create the necessary environment for their self-realisation.

Education is the only real tool of empowerment. Western nations and East Asia reaped the benefits of the demographic dividend. Now the fruits of this dividend are seeded in India, the Middle East and Africa. The youth here represent the powerhouse of the global economy. If we fail them, they will fail us.

We, in this great Assembly, must realize and accept that the nature and idiom of education has changed. Apart from conquering new frontiers of knowledge, we need new knowledge to solve problems. Everyday problems of ordinary people. They are the new aspirants emerging from the ICT revolution. The solutions we provide them must be accessible and affordable. The idiom of education has changed also because the nature of learning has changed. Information moves

across borders freely. It is shared instantaneously. Collaborative knowledge generation will be at the heart of education. Only through shared knowledge will we be able to resolve the challenges that confront the global community.

Added to this is the reality of the increasing hiatus between the rich and the poor, within and between nations; the disconnect between the two sides of the digital divide. The resource rich continue to be poor.

So let us pledge to empower our young. Let us enrich them with the tools needed to protect their future.

Last year, India achieved a historic milestone. We constitutionally protected the right to elementary education by enacting an enabling legislation. We are implementing it with effect from 1st April 2010.

Quality of education, however, continues to remain a concern.

Literacy in the 21st century will carry a different connotation. It will no longer mean knowledge of the three “r’s”, but the ability to connect and comprehend

We have taken the lead in attempting to develop an access device – Aakash (meaning ‘sky’) - that aims to provide a medium for every child to access the digital world and to learn from the vast repositories of knowledge contained therein. Aakash presently costs less than \$50 and our endeavour is to further reduce the cost to less than \$35. We are going to provide Aakash to every student in higher education and gradually to every child in secondary education. We dedicate this device to the children of the world. We will equip our children with the tools to face the challenges of the 21st century.

I also believe that the nature of delivery of educational services in higher education is changing rapidly. It may be too early to write the epitaph for the classroom, but the classrooms of the 21st century will be different from those that served us in the past. The content of pedagogy too would be radically altered. The silos that fragmented knowledge have already started collapsing. Customized learning across cultures will be the dominant theme of higher education. We need to open up the university as a learning space, embrace collaborative knowledge production, and break down the walls between institutions. The university as a physical entity may no longer remain the unit of learning space.

The 20th century witnessed an era of confrontation. The world stood divided. Let the 21st century usher in an era of collaboration. That will help unite the world. That is the change we desire. That is the change we want to see. Let UNESCO be at the forefront of that change. I have no doubt that the Director-General under her able leadership will endeavour to position UNESCO in a way that will help us all realize the aspirations of future generations. Under her leadership, UNESCO is seen to be not only caring and compassionate but also professional, efficient and responsive. I wish to thank the Director-General for her harmonious, constructive and comprehensive approach to all issues.

I wish the delegates to this Conference fruitful consultations in the days ahead. Let us usher in a new era of partnerships in education, science and culture – the three pillars of a collaborative 21st century.”

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**MV/KKP/rks**