

VICE PRESIDENT CALLS FOR MASS MOVEMENT TO PROMOTE DIGITAL LITERACY IN THE COUNTRY

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

The Vice President of India, Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu today called for a mass movement to promote digital literacy and urged all technological and educational institutions to play a leading role in that endeavor.

Virtually launching 'Adi Shankara Digital Academy' at Kaladi, the birthplace of Adi Shankaracharya, the Vice President said that information is the main commodity in the present-day knowledge society and whoever has quick access to information has the advantage. He called 'digitalization' as the medium of access to such information.

Drawing attention towards the unprecedented disruptions caused by Covid-19 pandemic, Shri Naidu said that it has forced millions of students out of classrooms due to closure of schools and the world community is trying to address this challenge by adopting online education.

He said technology provides us an opportunity to transform teaching and learning and expressed the need to constantly update and develop education models that suit the new era's demands in view of the fast-changing technology.

Enumerating several benefits of online education, the Vice President said that it can enable access to quality and affordable education in remote areas; it allows for a personalized learning experience and is especially helpful for groups such as working professionals and housewives who might not be able to attend regular courses.

Because of these advantages, the Vice President opined that online education is likely to remain a preferred choice in the post-pandemic period as well. There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the education landscape forever, he added.

Observing that even before COVID-19, the adoption of technology in education was gaining momentum, Shri Naidu said that global EdTech sector is attracting billions of dollars of investments and offers a huge opportunity to not only learners but to education entrepreneurs as well. He exhorted the youth to come forward and innovate to tap the potential offered by this sector.

Observing that the Covid-19 pandemic has forced us to learn how to keep the socio-economic process going in times of adversity, he said this experience has thrown up questions like how many are equipped to live the digital way. "Issues of availability of infrastructure, access to the required tools like computers and smart phones, speed and availability of internet came to the fore for which solutions need to be found out", he added.

The Vice President, however, cautioned to adopt a realistic approach in terms of what online education can deliver and what it cannot. "Online classes facilitate better teacher-student interaction through chat groups, video meetings, voting and document sharing, but it cannot replace the personal touch and warmth of a classroom", he said.

Referring to a recent study by Azim Premji University, Shri Naidu underlined that a vast majority of the teachers and parents consider the online mode of education inadequate and less effective. He opined that this could be partly due to hasty adoption of online education

necessitated by Covid-19 that has left much to be desired in terms of quality.

Stressing the importance of face-to-face classes and schools, he said that school provides a socializing space to students and enables them to imbibe values and discipline. Physical fitness, sports and Yoga are important elements of holistic development of the students which cannot be attained by online education alone, he said.

Stating that ancient Gurukul system strived to build a direct relationship between the Guru and Shishya, the Vice President said that this 'nearness' or 'closeness' to an able Guru is very important to impart value-based and holistic education among the children. Therefore, Shri Naidu called for developing a hybrid education model, in which classes are conducted both online and offline for all-round development of the students.

He also emphasized the need to put an end to rote learning and promote critical thinking, imagination and innovation among the students.

Calling for bridging the digital divide that exists between rural and urban areas, he wanted conscious policy decisions to support online education infrastructure by ensuring internet connectivity.

Stating that the evolution of human civilization has been a saga of innovation and use of tools for improving the ease and the comfort of living, Shri Naidu said that science and technology have made a huge difference in the way we live. "Digitalisation is the order of present-day life. E-education, e-health, e-commerce, e-governance etc are the virtual reality now", he added.

He praised 'Digital India' initiative for preparing the nation for Industrial Revolution 4.0 and empowering the citizens with technological entitlements. "The main objective is to improve the quality of life in all possible ways", he added.

Talking about the extensive use of digital technology in different sectors ever since the pandemic disrupted our normal routine, the Vice President commended the Indian judiciary for digitally hearing and disposing of cases. He specially complimented the Supreme Court for taking the lead in this regard and said this is the way forward.

He further said that E-medicine has found new traction and e-delivery of government services and entitlements in our country is proving to be effective with huge gains. "In essence, this is the era of 'digital life'. Virtual reality is the new reality", he added.

Referring to the World Bank estimate that improved access to internet adds to GDP growth, Shri Naidu said that this indicates the scope and potential of technology and process improvement through innovation.

Calling for putting in place 'an equitable digital eco-system' in the country, the Vice President said the Governments and private sector need to work on appropriate models for collective effort to enable a 'digital India' which gives every citizen her or his due.

To fully realize the benefits of the digital technology, the Vice President called for bridging the gap between 'digital haves' and 'digital have nots'.

Appreciating a number of digital initiatives by the Government for promoting digital education, he said that the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 proposes integration of technology in a big way for enhancing learning outcomes. He hoped that this push for digital education will play a key role in making India a global hub of education and innovation.

He praised the Adi Shankara Group of Institutions for nurturing the leaders of tomorrow and hoped that Adi Shankara Digital Academy (ASDA) would live up to the people's expectations by providing them a good online learning experience.

Shri K Anand, Managing Trustee, Adi Shankara Trust, Sr C R Gowrishankar, CEO and Administrator, Sringeri Mut, Smt. Chitra, Director e-Drona Learning and others were present.

Following is the full text of the speech –

“Sisters and brothers,

I am pleased to join you all for the launch of Adi Shankara Digital Academy (ASDA) today. This Digital Academy is the latest addition to the Adi Shankara education group and is aimed at giving the best online teaching experience including traditional courses for National and International students.

Dear friends,

There could not have been a better time to launch this noble initiative.

According to UNESCO more than 1.4 billion children in 166 countries were affected by school closures due to the pandemic in April, 2020. That is 84 percent of total enrolled learners worldwide. Even today, over 22 crore students are out of classrooms due to countrywide closure in 23 countries.

To address this unprecedented disruption to learning and teaching activities, the world community has taken to online education. There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the education landscape forever.

Firstly, this switch to online has several benefits. However, it has to be accessible and affordable to all. In a country like India, there are vast disparities between rural and urban areas. Online courses can help bridge the difference and enable students even in the remotest parts of the country to have access to quality education at an affordable cost. Thus virtual classroom will be available to anyone with an internet connection.

Secondly, online classes will immensely help those not able to attend classes in person such as working professionals and housewives. I am sure that the courses started by Adi Shankara Digital Academy will be very helpful for such groups in enhancing their skill sets and increasing their employability.

Third important benefit of online education is its flexibility. It offers a wide selection of programs and allows for a personalized learning experience. Online study material such as videos, photos, and eBooks enable students to set their own pace and adopt a schedule that suits them best.

These advantages clearly make online education a preferred choice and it appears that the adoption of online learning will continue to persist post-pandemic period as well.

The course of evolution of human civilization has been a saga of innovation in the making and use of tools for improving the ease and the comfort of living.

From living by hunting to depending on the 'click of a button' for all the needs of life is the synopsis of this huge transformation. Science and technology have made a huge difference in the way we live.

This is an ongoing quest that never ends. Interconnectedness through 'internet' is the order of the present day life. Artificial intelligence is set to further change the scheme of things. These are exciting times brimming with opportunities but challenges accompanying.

Digitalisation is the order of present-day life. E- education, e- health, e-commerce, e-governance etc are the virtual reality now

An educational technology and online tutoring firm from South India has become popular and I expect to hear more names in the future in this field. Young minds should come forward and innovate to tap the potential offered by the EdTech sector.

Despite immense possibilities and scope of online education, we must also be realistic in terms of what it can deliver and what it can't. It is true that online classes facilitate better teacher-student interaction through chat groups, video meetings, voting and document sharing, but it cannot replace the personal touch and warmth of a classroom.

Furthermore, the hasty adoption of online education necessitated by Covid-19 has left much to be desired in terms of quality. Prior to this pandemic, neither students nor teachers were trained to interact in the virtual environment.

Face-to-face classes and schools are important for various other reasons too. School is a great place for socializing for the students. It enables students to imbibe values and discipline.

In the famed Gurukul system in ancient India, there stress was upon a direct relationship between the Guru and Shishya. The Sanskrit word used for a Gurukul teacher was 'Upadhyay' which literally means 'near whom the students go for learning'.

Dear friends, this 'nearness' or 'closeness' to an able Guru is very important to impart value-based and holistic education among the children. Education does not mean mere accumulation of knowledge. Education means enlightenment and empowerment of an individual, who evolves into a better human being. It is important for students to be mentally agile and physically fit through sports and Yoga. Apparently, this cannot be attained by online education alone.

Therefore, the need of the hour is to develop a hybrid education model, in which classes are conducted both online and offline for all-round development of the students. Technology provides us an opportunity to transform teaching and learning. It is time to put an end to rote learning and promote critical thinking, imagination and innovation among the students. In view of the fast changing technology, we need to constantly update and develop education models that suit the new era's demands.

This again draws our attention to the wide digital divide that exists between rural and urban areas. Not only are there gaps in the digital infrastructure of rural India, digital literacy is also low, especially among the parents.

Therefore, conscious policy decisions are required to support online education infrastructure by ensuring internet connectivity.

I am happy that the Government of India is already implementing several initiatives to address this disparity. Sensing the advantages of the Information and Communication Technology, Digital India has been launched a few years back so that India is not left out of the scope of Industrial Revolution 4.0, having been late for the earlier three such revolutions.

Digital India envisages empowering every citizen with technological entitlements that enable him

to make the best of emerging opportunities in every domain of concern for his/her life. The main objective is to improve the quality of life in all possible ways.

'Information' is the main commodity in this knowledge society. Whoever has quick access to information has the advantage. Digitalization is the medium of access to such information. The pace of dissemination of such information and access to it are the key determinants of the quality of present-day life.

Further to the telecom revolution in our country, the way of life has undergone an unimaginable transformation. The spread of mobile phones and growing internet penetration is adding to the 'smartness' of living.

The contours and speed of this transformation inevitably throw up their own challenges. Is every citizen benefitting to the same extent? This is the principal challenge.

Every social order is inherently inequitable. The goal of guided 'socio-economic' transformation is to minimize the inherent inequalities besides preventing accentuation of existing inequalities as new forces of change begins to manifest. Digitalization is such a new factor of change and it needs to be handled properly.

In this 'information age', the main challenges are; digital infrastructure, digital literacy and digital access that make or mar the ongoing revolution.

The Covid-19 pandemic, despite the havoc it caused, has made people across the globe wake up to the need for a new normal of living. It forced us to learn how to keep the socio-economic process going in times of adversity. The learning includes working from home, learning from home etc. with digital platforms offering the solutions.

This experience of living with corona threw up questions like how many are equipped to live the digital way. Issues of availability of infrastructure, access to the required tools like computers and smartphones, speed and availability of internet came to the fore for which solutions need to be found out.

There has been extensive use of digital technology in different sectors ever since the pandemic disrupted our normal routine. All through the corona time, the courts in our country continued to function to a great extent making use of technology. I must commend the Indian judiciary for digitally hearing and disposing of cases. Happy to learn that the district courts have disposed of more than 35 lakh cases, the High Courts have dealt with around 14 lakh matters and the Supreme Court more than 30,000 matters. The Supreme Court needs to be complimented for taking the lead in this regard. This is the way forward.

Educational institutions have begun to function under restrictions using technology. E-medicine has found new traction. Working from home has proved to be a big success showing the way for the future.

e-delivery of government services and entitlements in our country is proving to be effective with huge gains.

In essence, this is the era of 'digital life'. Virtual reality is the new reality. In the process, we should not miss out on the essence of life. Life should not be reduced to a mechanical way of coping with situations. The vibrancy of life including the manifestations of feelings, sentiments, fellowship, shared common good and spiritual awakening needs to be given their space.

A World Bank estimate says improved access to net adds to GDP growth. In our country, it is said that internet revolution can add about one trillion dollars to our GDP by 2025. This indicates the scope and potential of technology and process improvement through innovation.

To enable the inevitable course of 'digitalization' to be more equal, the Government of India has launched several programmes aimed at improving infrastructure, literacy, access etc. Bharat Net project strives to build broadband connectivity in villages, Digital Saksharata Abhiyan aims to increase digital literacy. Online study portals such as Swayam, Swayam-Prabha and National Digital Library are helping students as well as teachers in up-skilling as well as providing quality resources.

The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 proposes integration of technology in a big way for enhancing learning outcomes.

Efforts in this regard need to be more galvanized so that 'an equitable digital eco-system' is put in place in our country. Corona has taught due lessons in this regard.

The Governments and private sector need to work on appropriate models for collective effort to enable a 'digital India' which gives every citizen her or his due. Time is the essence.

Shankaracharya had unified and established several currents of Hindu thought and philosophy into 'Advaita' philosophy. This principle of 'non-dualism' is all about realizing the 'Atman' and merging with the 'Brahman', the ultimate truth. It is a path towards self-realization or 'moksha' within one's life time.

Digitalisation is a very powerful tool to lift the norms of our living to a new normal. Its objective shall not be mere adding to material comforts. It should be used to reduce the drudgery of living and enhancing an individual's contribution to the collective well-being in an architecture of new digital norms.

To fully realize the benefits of this powerful technology, the 'dualities' in the form of differences of access and ability shall be removed. An order of 'digital haves' and 'digital have nots' is just not acceptable. Bridging this gap is the immediate task.

Let us strive for a 'Digital India' that belongs and benefits all Indians and also the citizens of the world.

I am happy to know that Adi Shankara Group of Institutions, situated in the hallowed land of the birthplace of Adi Shankaracharya, is nurturing and grooming the leaders of tomorrow. Adi Shankara Digital Academy (ASDA) is the latest one in their endeavor towards empowerment through education.

I hope this Academy will live up to the people's expectations and help create skilled manpower for 21st century needs.

I wish you all the very best.

Thank you.

Jai Hind!"

MS/DP

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