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A RIGHT UNDER SIEGE

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Right to Information (RTI)

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The writer was Union law minister from May 2009 to 2011.

The words of Sir Francis Bacon — “Knowledge is power” — aptly bring out the essence of the Right to Information Act (RTI). Knowledge, gained through access to correct information, has the ability to upturn the power dynamic: It places a person at a formidable position to fight for their rights and enables them to ask vital questions.

The introduction of this Act into the country’s approach to governance has revolutionised the democratic landscape of India. It has strengthened the principles of democracy, which in [Abraham Lincoln](#)’s words is “of the people, by the people and for the people”, by facilitating people’s participation in governance. Empowerment of the people by enabling the demand of information from government authorities lifted the veil of secrecy from government functioning — which helped in keeping a check on arbitrary decision making by public institutions. Contrary to popular belief, the RTI was not just limited to the urban elites; it gave voice to the poor sections of the society by providing them with a tool of information to hold the government accountable. This was confirmed by a nation-wide assessment held by PricewaterhouseCoopers, which stated that out of two million RTI applications filed between 2005 and 2009, a total of 4,00,000 were from rural areas.

Even though the Supreme Court in *S P Gupta vs President Of India And Ors* (1982) held the right to information as a fundamental right, India struggled to have a national law on it for the next 20 years. The National Campaign for People’s Right to Information’s (NCPRI) RTI Bill was delayed multiple times by the then NDA government. In 2002, under pressure from the SC, the government introduced a weakened and toothless Freedom to Information Act in the Parliament. Despite being passed by the Parliament and receiving Presidential assent, the act was never notified by the NDA government.

When the UPA government, led by the Congress, took office in 2004, the struggle of the right to information movement finally bore fruit — the Right to Information Act was enacted in 2005. The Act remains the strongest legislation made by any government across the world in the context of transparency and access to information. It was possible with active engagement between civil society organisations, NCPRI, National Advisory Council and the government.

Alongside the enactment of the RTI, the Second Administration Reforms Commission, which I headed, was set up by the then Union government to reform the public administrative system. On analyses of the Act, the commission concluded that right to information formed the foundation of good governance, as transparency is one of its core elements. It was realised that the strengthening of the RTI would be a step towards transforming the covert public administrative system into a “public-centric” administrative system. Therefore, the commission recommended various measures to toughen the Act and make procedures to access information people-friendly. These ranged from the repealing of the Official Secret Act, introducing an oath of transparency to use of multi-media campaigns in local languages for awareness and opening up the working of parliamentary standing committees for public access.

In October 2018, the RTI completed 13 years of its inception. For the last few years, it has faced constant onslaught by the current regime. The latest Global Right to Information Rating has

ranked India at the sixth position, a rank lower than last year. While under the UPA government, India positioned itself at second place, under the BJP-led government the ranking has successively dropped. Such a drop is further contextualised with the findings of a study conducted by the Satark Nagrik Sangathan and Centre for Equity Studies. It revealed that Central Information Commission took an average of 319 days to hear and give an order on an appeal from the date it was filed before the commission, with the maximum number of days taken by the CIC reaching to 862 days. The callous attitude of Information Commissioners (ICs) reflects in the fact that an average of 56 per cent of orders recorded violations of Section 20 of the RTI, based on which penalties should have been imposed. But a penalty was imposed in only 4 per cent of the cases.

The inactivity of the government in strengthening the RTI has led to only seven ICs working at present of which, along with the Chief Information Commissioner, four ICs are to retire by the end of this year — reducing the strength of CIC to just three, against the mandated strength of 11. To further its motive to break the structure of transparency and accountability, it has attempted to weaken the RTI through an amendment, which gives the power to decide the tenure and salary of the ICs to the central government; thereby, directly influencing the independence of the CIC. A fresh attempt to indirectly amend the RTI has also been made through the Personal Data Protection Bill that makes the wordings of Section 8(j) of the RTI vague, not specifying the extent of harm or differentiation between personal information and personal data.

The regular protests by the civil society against the lethargy of the current government in effectively protecting the people's right to information reflects the severity of the problem, especially against the backdrop of recent interference by the BJP-led government in the autonomous institutions of our country.

The one area where the BJP government has failed to imitate the UPA government is in its commitment to uphold democracy by supporting people-centric initiatives. A democratic government's duty is to ensure the trust of its citizens emboldens with every step it takes. However, the recent efforts of the present regime go against this fundamental principle. Giving up its anti-people decisions, it must ensure that it fills the loopholes in the RTI Act rather than digging for more of them.

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NUDGED INTO ACTION: ON THE LOKPAL ACT

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Challenges of corruption

It should have never come to this on the Lokpal. That it requires a Supreme Court order to nudge the government to make any progress towards establishing the anti-graft institution is a poor commentary on its functioning. The court has asked the eight-member Search Committee under the Lokpal Act to recommend a panel of names before the end of February. This shortlist has to be sent to the Selection Committee, headed by the Prime Minister. It has taken five years since the Lokpal Act, 2013, received the President's assent on January 1, 2014, for a Search Committee to even begin its work. It was formed only on September 27, 2018, after Common Cause, an NGO, filed a contempt petition against the government over the delay in constituting the authority despite a Supreme Court verdict in April 2017. It is true that setting up the Search Committee requires some groundwork, as its composition should be drawn from diverse fields such as anti-corruption policy, public administration, law, banking and insurance; also, half its membership should consist of women, backward class, minority and SC/ST candidates. However, it is the government's duty to expedite this process and not cite it as a reason for delay. Even after it was formed, the Search Committee has been handicapped because of lack of office space, manpower, infrastructure and a secretariat. The court has now asked the government to provide the required infrastructure. In the past too, the court has admonished the Centre for the delay in creating the institution. In its April 2017 verdict, the court brushed aside the reason that the government was awaiting the passage of an amendment based on a parliamentary committee report and said there was no legal bar on the Selection Committee moving ahead with its work even if there was a vacancy in it.

There is a good deal of politics behind the delay. The Selection Committee, which includes the Lok Sabha Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition, the Chief Justice of India and an eminent jurist, has met in the past without Mallikarjun Kharge, who heads the Congress in the Lok Sabha. He has been skipping meetings, as he is aggrieved that the government has not made him a full member, and has roped him in as a 'special invitee'. The government sticks to its view that he has not been recognised as the Leader of the Opposition by the Speaker. This minor issue has been resolved in respect of appointments to other posts such as CBI Director and Central Vigilance Commissioner by a simple amendment to treat the leader of the largest Opposition party as the Leader of the Opposition for this purpose. This amendment has not been brought about despite a parliamentary committee report endorsing the idea in December 2015. Nothing except the lack of political will to establish the Lokpal can explain years of delay.

The Meghalaya government must urgently ensure that all illegal mines are shut down

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YOUNG PEOPLE MUST STRIVE TO SERVE THE LESS FORTUNATE AND LEARN TO BE EMPATHETIC TO NEEDS AND SUFFERINGS OF FELLOW CITIZENS: VICE PRESIDENT

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Human Values - Lessons from the lives and teachings of great Leaders, Reformers and Administrators

Vice President's Secretariat

Young people must strive to serve the less fortunate and learn to be empathetic to needs and sufferings of fellow citizens: Vice President

Be aware of the hidden dangers to health posed by modern life style;

Students should diligently study the History of this great country and learn to appreciate the uniqueness of Indian culture;

My vision is to build a strong, stable, unified, prosperous and inclusive India;

Mahatma Gandhi's vision of service and humanism has inspired and motivated generations of world leaders;

Gandhiji has given us the most powerful weapons of truth and non violence that can defeat the greatest of odds;

Interacts with a group of Students from Kerala

Posted On: 22 JAN 2019 1:51PM by PIB Delhi

The Vice President of India, Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu has asked young students to work to serve the less privileged and less fortunate. He said that it was very important for the younger generation to be empathetic to sufferings and struggles of fellow citizens and to strive to do something meaningful for their betterment.

Shri Naidu was interacting with a group of Students from Kerala, here today, who are in Delhi as a part of a tour programme being organized by 'Mathrubhumi', a Media House from Kerala, in connection with the 150th Birth Anniversary celebrations of Mahatma Gandhi.

The Vice President stressed upon the importance of education in bringing social, cultural and economical transformation in the country. He called upon students to imbibe a habit of constant learning and embrace emerging technologies to keep pace with the changing world.

Expressing concern over the rising incidence life style disease, Shri Naidu urged the students to be aware of the hidden dangers of modern life style, comprising of unhealthy food and physically dormant jobs. He asked them to develop the habit of regular physical exercise, especially practicing Yoga and dedicate time for outdoor activities, to stay healthy.

He wanted students and the younger generation to respect nature and learn to live with nature. 'You must keep it in mind that nature and culture together work for the betterment of humanity', he said.

Observing that unity in diversity is India's greatest strength, Shri Naidu asked youngsters to study the History of this great country diligently and to learn to appreciate the uniqueness of Indian culture. 'They must be aware of our country's great culture and timeless traditions and work to fortify India's spirit', he said.

Unveiling his vision of building a strong, stable, unified, prosperous and inclusive India, the Vice President encouraged the citizens of this country to perform their duties with utmost sincerity, to the best of their capabilities.

Applauding Mathrubhumi for celebrating the 150th Birth Anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, Shri Naidu said that the Mahatma had given us the most powerful weapons of truth and non violence to defeat the greatest of odds. 'Mahatma Gandhi's vision of service and humanism has inspired and motivated generations of world leaders', he added.

The Vice President said that Gandhiji was an inspiration to all mankind. Speaking of Gandhiji's deep sense of compassion and inclusiveness that defined his outlook, Shri Naidu said that the Mahatma truly believed that cleansing our inner being of all evils was as important as cleansing our countries of servitude.

Expressing great pride at the Indian civilization that has always considered the world as one family, (Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam), the Vice President said that our commitment to the cause of climate change, solar energy and conserving nature, will hopefully, get reflected in educating students and making them globally responsible citizens.

Urging the students to speak only in their mother tongues at home, the Vice President asked them to always remember with love and gratitude the Mother, Mother tongue,

Motherland, Birth place and Guru.

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(Release ID: 1560899) Visitor Counter : 345

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REVISIT EDUCATION SYSTEM TO IMPART INDIAN VALUES AND ETHOS: VICE PRESIDENT

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Role of Family, Society and Educational institutions in inculcating values

Vice President's Secretariat

Revisit education system to impart Indian values and ethos: Vice President

University campuses should not be vitiated;

Cautions youth against addiction to internet and social media;

Addresses Diamond Jubilee Celebrations of PGDAV College

Posted On: 27 JAN 2019 4:06PM by PIB Delhi

The Vice President of India, Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu has called for revisiting education system with emphasis on history, heritage, culture, traditions, values and ethos of India. He said that the stories of sacrifice, valour and contributions made by the freedom fighters and other leaders should become an important component of our education system.

Addressing the Diamond Jubilee Celebrations of Pannalal Girdharlal Dayanand Anglo-Vedic College, in here today, the Vice President said that educational institutions must become temples of learning and wisdom. They should become sanctuaries of peace and harmony, growth and development, he added.

Shri Naidu said that emphasized that the atmosphere in university campuses should not be vitiated by conducting events which are not connected with education. He said that character-building should become the essential dharma of education.

The Vice President said that said that serving in organizations like the Scouts and Guides or NCC should be made mandatory for students to inculcate discipline and a sense of empathy to serve the needy.

Shri Naidu said that education must focus on developing a holistic personality of the individual. Apart from learning and acquiring knowledge, students must also learn to practice yoga and participate in sporting activities as it was essential to develop a sense of equilibrium in the stress- filled world of today. He called upon educational institutions to impart spiritual values as well, he added.

The Vice President urged students to arm themselves with knowledge, wisdom and ethical principles before they head out into the world. He also asked them to explore the possibilities of providing creative solutions to problems like climate change faced by the nation and the world.

Terming as worrisome trend, the growing incidence of lifestyle diseases due to consumption of unhealthy food, sedentary habits and stress, the Vice President called upon the people, particularly youngsters to develop healthy dietary habits and take up regular physical activity.

The Vice President cautioned the youth against addiction to internet and said that constant connectivity was proving to be detrimental to children. He asked parents and teachers to protect children from the pitfalls of technology and internet.

Students, faculty of the Pannalal Girdharlal Dayanand Anglo-Vedic College, the Former Governor of Karnataka, and the Chairman of the Governing Body, PGDAV College, Shri T.N. Chaturvedi, the Vice Chancellor of University of Delhi, Prof. Yogesh Tyagi and other dignitaries were present on the occasion.

Following is the text of Vice President's address:

"I am very happy to be here at the Diamond Jubilee Celebrations of Pannalal Girdharlal Dayanand Anglo-Vedic College, one of the oldest constituent colleges of the top ranking University of Delhi.

In 1886 a college named Dayanand Anglo-Vedic College was started by Mahatma Hans Raj in Lahore. Mahatma Hansraj was a disciple of Swami Dayanand ji who was a great revolutionary and social reformer.

He established the Arya Samaj to free the society from superstitious beliefs prevailing at the time. Mahatma Hans Raj was a great educationist who gave the Dayanand Anglo Vedic College its name.

The name reflected his passion for progressive ideals.

He was a firm believer in nurturing a modern scientific aptitude along with imparting Vedic spiritual learning to the students.

This is the synthesis that we must now emphasize upon. We should be rooted in our native tradition but not be insulated in our outlook.

He wished for youngsters to reach for the stars and expand the horizons of knowledge, all the while upholding the morals and values of our great cultural tradition.

It is heartening to note that the DAV Institutions which made a modest beginning with one college has today expanded and boasts of more than 1000 schools, colleges and institutions of varied disciplines in practically all parts of India.

I am happy to know that the DAV institutions are taking huge strides of progress today under the dynamic and able leadership of Padmashri Sh. Punam Suriiji.

I am told that PGDAV college was established in 1958 as Camp College with the noble aim of providing education to the repatriates from Pakistan while they worked to earn a livelihood.

I am happy to note that PGDAV College is rated as one of the best colleges in the University of Delhi.

The endeavour of the college has always been to provide quality education and exposure to help students build a better and fulfilling future. Its aim has been to inculcate a sense of

responsibility in youngsters towards the Mother Land and deprived brethren of the society.

I understand that the students are constantly encouraged to think and act positively and contribute significantly towards eradication of evils like drug addiction, alcoholism, casteism etc.

PGDAV College is well-known for excellence not only in academics but also in sports and other co-curricular activities. This holistic view of education needs further reinforcement today.

I am happy to know that the College strives to provide an environment that nurtures qualities of humanism and inculcates values of team work.

In the 60th year of the institutional journey, I congratulate the students, faculty and the management of the PGDAV for their exceptional contributions in the field of collegiate education.

My dear Young friends,

The Years you spend in the portals of this institution are crucial ones. This is your formative phase, the preparative phase before you become active participants in the process of nation building.

I request you to use this time wisely.

I urge you to spend every available moment at your disposal to learn new concepts and do innovative things, to hone your skills and to better yourself.

Soon you will be active members in the world of work. You will contribute to the society and you will make decisions and take initiatives that will decide the future of this country.

I have always been an ardent believer in the power and potential of the youth. It gives me great hope that 65% of our population is below 35 years of age.

I believe that the story of our country will unfold as you grow into active citizens.

I therefore urge you to arm yourself with knowledge, wisdom, moral values and ethical principles before you head out into the world.

The youth of a nation always have the most creative solutions to problems and issues that the nation faces.

I firmly believe that they should be capable of forming their own opinions and attempting the impossible.

I encourage you to creatively explore the unknown. Let innovation be the key driver.

But under no circumstances should you cause disruptions.

Educational institutions should be temples of learning and wisdom, the sanctity of which should always be protected. They should be sanctuaries of peace and harmony, of growth and development.

India is a thriving, vibrant democracy. At the heart of its life and vitality is the commitment to solve issues amicably through peaceful, informed, debates and discussions.

As future legislators, lawmakers and policy planners, I want you to internalize this democratic tradition before you head out into the world.

My dear young friends,

A healthy population is a necessary precondition to progress. Only a healthy nation can be a wealthy nation.

Recent years have seen an exponential increase in the number of chronic diseases due to the disruptive lifestyle changes in the country.

Lack of exercise, irregular eating habits including consumption of unhealthy food and increase in stress are some of the key reasons behind this worrisome trend.

Scientists have named this collection of lifestyle diseases caused due to increased mental exertion and decreased physical activity as the 'New Age Syndrome' (NWS).

It is a basket of maladies including obesity, hypertension, diabetes, heart disease and shortened life span.

What is even more appalling is that children and young adults are increasingly falling prey to these diseases.

It has been estimated that nearly 30% of India's teenagers are obese.

I urge all the young people present here to focus on your health and be physically fit. Along with studies, take part in sports and play games.

On many occasions I myself have spoken about the benefits of Yoga for mind and body. Yoga does wonders to relieve stress and cope with depression and anxiety. The world is celebrating Yoga today.

I urge you to practice and propagate this great tradition of ours.

Martin Luther King once remarked that 'the function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education.'

Character building is the essential *dharma* of education, what Swami Vivekananda called 'Man making' or 'realizing the potential in each of us'.

In order to build character, one must learn to look outside the four walls of the classroom. Only half of a student's time should be spent in the classrooms. The other half should be spent outside, in the service of the community.

We have examples of the transformation brought about by students in social revolutions such as the 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan' by serving as ambassadors and change agents.

Serving in organizations like the Scouts and guides or NCC should be made mandatory for every student to inculcate discipline and a sense of willingness to serve the needy.

My dear young friends,

We live in a world that is pervaded by technology and social media.

The world is now in need of constant connectivity and this tendency is proving highly detrimental to children, teenagers and adolescents.

The dangers posed by this constant connectivity range from cyber bullying to data theft to impersonation to financial fraud.

Young people should be allowed only a limited amount of screen time, whether it be smart phones or computers. Technology is beneficial to us only if used intelligently, judiciously and cautiously.

Parents at home and teachers in schools and colleges should forever be alert to protect our youngsters from pitfalls of technology and internet.

We should never let virtual conversations and relationships destroy their real counterparts.

Dear sisters and brothers,

India is on a growth trajectory.

Its economy is stable, its democracy is vibrant and its society is youthful and brimming with energy.

As the world economy is slowing down, India is maintaining a steady GDP growth rate of over 7%. All macroeconomic indicators signal a healthy trend of growth.

India has registered the fastest growth in FDI in over two decades. The FDI inflows into India were to the tune of \$38 billion in 2018, overtaking China and evolving as the favorite destination in emerging markets.

India also accounts for about 15% of global growth.

India has also steadily ascended the Ease of Doing Business Index to reach the 77th position among 190 countries.

The size of the Indian economy is expected to touch \$10 trillion by 2030.

All this speaks for the reform oriented policies of the government of India.

In a bleak world economy, India is definitely the bright spot.

World nations and investors from around the globe are looking to do business with India with increased enthusiasm.

India has also witnessed a digital revolution in the recent times which has helped in simplifying processes and procedures and in easing bottlenecks.

I urge each and every one of you to take account of the infinite possibilities that this India that is on the move offers.

Utilize in full measure everything that this emergent India has to offer for you own personal growth and for the growth of the country.

Be entrepreneurs, builders, business persons, educationists and innovators. Be whoever you

are dreaming of becoming.

The India of today will support your dreams and your enterprises in every way possible.

After all, India is home to the second largest start-up ecosystem in the world.

My dear young friends,

What you're learning here today will determine whether we can build a better India and a better world.

I have full faith in your abilities, your conviction and your intentions.

You need to work hard, work smart and work with a moral compass in hand.

You must strive to combine knowledge with wisdom.

I once again wish the PGDAV College, its faculty and students all the very best on this momentous occasion.

May you have a bright future and in turn shape a better tomorrow for our motherland and for the world.

Jai Hind!"

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