

# The UPA Government's Agenda in the Education Sector

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Manisha Jain\*\* The Government in its education agenda has laid a continued thrust on the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and increase in female literacy while also focusing on expansion in higher education through the setting up of new institutions. The Government will also work towards achieving the three-fold objective of expansion, inclusion and excellence. President Smt. Pratibha Patil, in Parliament stressed that the Government's focus would be on making quality education a right through the enactment of the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Bill. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan has been able to provide access to children to elementary schools and retention has gone up owing to the universal mid-day meal programme. The Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan will universalise access to secondary education. The massive expansion in higher education through the setting up of new institutions will enable the country to meet the challenge of education in full measure. The President further stated that in the last five years, a wide range of scholarships and educational loans were introduced for needy and deserving students. This effort will be reviewed and strengthened. The Government's strategy for higher education will be formulated around a three-fold objective of expansion, inclusion and excellence. The President further observed that while male literacy went up to over 75 % in the last census and is expected to be higher now, female literacy was only 54 % in 2001. The Government will recast the National Literacy Mission as a National Mission for Female Literacy to make every woman literate in the next five years. Increased female literacy is expected to become a force multiplier for all social development programmes. For an increase in female literacy, it is very important to have gender sensitization programmes, in order to increase awareness among people and to ensure equal opportunities for girls. More and more girls need to get the benefit of school education. Girls from poor sections of society lose out on a chance to go to school because they are burdened with domestic work and the added responsibility of looking after younger siblings. A change can be brought about here with regular awareness and gender sensitisation programmes. The Union Cabinet has cleared the Right to Education Bill. It is slated to be introduced in Parliament in the current session. When RTE becomes law, it will empower the seven-year old 86th Constitutional Amendment that made free and compulsory education a Fundamental Right. The RTE Bill includes guidelines for states and the Centre to execute and enforce this right. Once enacted, the bill will go a long way in ensuring free education for children in the 6-14 age group and helping to achieve the literacy goals of the country. The Union Minister for Human Resource Development, Shri Kapil Sibal, enunciating the plans and agenda of his Ministry, stated that all steps would be taken to enact the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Bill. They would also evolve a consensus for the establishment of an All India Madarsa Board. He stressed that they would formulate a policy framework for Public Private Partnership in school education and evolve a variety of PPP models. They would further the use of information technology in secondary schools and in open/distance schooling through broadband connectivity. Outlining the agenda of his Ministry in the first 100 days of UPA's governance, Shri Sibal said that they would evolve a National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education in consultation with all stakeholders and in accordance with the NCF, 2005. Shri Sibal also plans to bring in a tough law to prevent and punish educational malpractices. He plans to liberalise the education sector to bring in more finances, better academic infrastructure and multiple work opportunities. The Government plans to set up an autonomous, overarching authority for Higher Education and research based on the recommendations of the Yashpal Committee and the National Knowledge Commission. They plan to bring in a law for mandatory assessment and accreditation in Higher Education through an independent regulatory authority. Shri Sibal's proposed policy initiatives include the launching of a new scheme of interest subsidy on educational loans taken for professional courses by economically weaker students. A new policy on distant learning would be formulated. Model Degree Colleges would be established in 100 districts with significant population of weaker sections and minorities. Hundred women's hostels would be sanctioned in higher

educational institutions in districts with significant population of weaker sections and minorities. The Government will also review the functioning of the existing deemed universities, operationalise 12 newly established Central Universities and two new IITs. Assistance will be provided to States to establish at least 100 new Polytechnics in Districts without any polytechnic at present Approvals would be obtained for establishing 10 new NITs in the unserved States so that every State has one earmarked IIT. This will go a long way towards achieving the three-fold objective of expansion, inclusion and excellence. The Government also plans to set up a National Council For Higher Education.. The enactment of the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Bill would give a further boost to the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan by improving access to children to elementary schools. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) programme was started in 2001-02 to universalize elementary education in the country, in a time bound manner. The programme seeks to provide access, equity, retention and quality in the area of elementary education. The programme is being implemented in partnership with the States to address the children in the age group of 6 to14 years. The achievements of SSA till September 2008 are opening of 2,61,562 new schools, construction of 2,12,677 school buildings, construction of 8,83,479 additional classrooms, 1,82,539 drinking water facilities, construction of 2,47,071 toilets, supply of free textbooks to 8.11 crore children and appointment of 9.66 lakh teachers. There has been a significant reduction in the number of out of school children on account of SSA interventions. States/Union Territories have reported that there are only 45 lakh children in the 6-14 age group who are not enrolled in a school. From the year 2008-09, the Midday Meal Scheme was extended to upper primary stage (VI to VIII) in all government and government aided schools in the country. To streamline and strengthen the monitoring of the scheme a separate web portal is being developed. So the UPA government's term is going to see the opening up of the education sector in a big way. It will also ensure better access to quality education for girls and women, better retention in schools and massive awareness generation. (PIB Features) \*Freelance Writer Disclaimer: The views expressed by the author in this feature are entirely his own and do not necessarily reflect the views of INVC 

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