Speech of DR. D. Purandeswari, Minister of State for Human Resource Development, Government of India

In the long and chequered history of mankind and the annals of human march towards progress, the 21st Century belongs to science and technology. In order to expedite the process of development and take our country towards new heights of excellence, it is essential that we take to a process of massive application of science and technology in the realm of womankind.

India's contribution to the global women's development has been rich, diverse and in many ways unique. The principle of gender equality has been basic to Indian thinking over a century. A deep concern for the status of women and the recognition that the progress of the nation was closely linked with the advancement of women, have under-pinned Indian planning and policy since Independence.

Though it is well recognized that efforts to promote greater equality between men and women can contribute to the overall development of human society, yet despite this high-line consciousness and greater awareness of the role of women, no society treats its women as well as its men. Consequently women continue to suffer from diverse deprivations.

A study by International Labour Organization reveals that women who represent 50 percent of the world adult population, and one third of the official labour force, and perform nearly 2/3rd of the working hours receive only one tenth of the world's income and own less than one percent of the world property.

This is despite the fact that the U.N. Declaration of Women's Rights 1967 formally postulated the principle of equality of men and women and advocated its universal recognition in law by all countries as an absolute necessity. The General Assembly of U.N. postulated this egalitarian, concept of assuring and achieving equal rights to women as those of men.

And yet gender discrimination against girl children is unfortunately widely prevalent throughout the world and more prominently in Third world countries. This gender disparity is palpably evident in the education sector which hits inclusive growth very adversely.

Science and technology brings economic growth and well-being to people; not only because of the empowerment of women through science and technology, but also because of the enrichment of science and technology through women's participation. Engagement of women at the grassroot is inevitable for worldwide science and technology capacity building.

Today women force comprises only a small percentage of the scientific and academic community barring teachers at the school and pre-school levels. It is not the concern of a nation only, but there are many players and stakeholders who are yet to reach this millennium goal.

Programmes should be worked out to empower women through innovative scientific activities

integrating action oriented literacy, sound micro-finance and micro-enterprise training as well as an understanding of legal rights and advocacy.

Given appropriate space, the women force can play an increasingly important role in social, industrial and economic development of the country. The involvement and engagement of women in science on an equal footing with men would directly contribute to improving the livelihood of people, making it more sustainable and thereby promoting the social and economic advancement of societies.

It is important to note that women's empowerment cannot be complete without their equitable participation in science and technology. Women have special role to play in the area of science and technology. They can bring a wave of creative and generative energy in the field of science and technology. Today their participation is restricted and limited to very less numbers because of widespread discrimination at the basic education levels and lack of opportunities for pursuing higher studies.

Reducing drudgery with the help of science and technology is another major area of importance for freeing women from the never ending domestic chores and making her contribute - to the enrichment of mainstream of the society.

There is a need for global capacity building in science and technology, particularly the creation of a critical mass of well-educated scientists and engineers among women, this would make the greatest possible use of brainpower, and by giving women and men equal opportunities to excel it would be the right thing to do. There is a need to enable the billions of women around the world to apply the fruits of science and technology, such as useful products and services, for growing their countries' economies while improving their own lives.

Science and technology offer solutions to many challenges faced by rural women also; they can contribute to food security by boosting crop yields; reduce women's domestic and productive work by introducing labour-saving technologies; and increase participation of women in the rural labour market through better communications.

It would help transforming India into a developed nation by 2020. This necessitates not only successful adoption of latest technologies but also developing appropriate technologies. The parameters that determine national development will also keep changing throwing up new challenges. India is a country of diversity - social, cultural and economic and this diversity which is the fabric of the country has tremendous impact on achieving prosperity. Science and technology can be a powerful tool in bridging the divide and achieving inclusive development If and only if it is employed for this purpose.

The United Nation's Millennium Development goals (MDGs), set to overcome poverty, exclusion and environmental problems by the year 2015 have identified eight international development goals that include eradicating extreme poverty and hunger including achieving decent employment for women, universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering of women, reducing child

mortality, improving maternal health, combating disease epidemics such as HIV/AIDS, among other things. Interestingly, even a cursory look at these goals drive home the point that almost all of them centre round the welfare of women and also spell that the aim of the MDGs can never be achieved without the participation and unfettered involvement of women.

With rapid technological developments, inequality will further worsen unless special efforts are made to address the needs of the poor, women, rural, disabled and others who are un-reached or less reached. Multi-pronged strategy is required to make India's innovation system meet the needs of all classes in the society.

The need of the hour is to strengthen the capabilities of those ignored so far and tap their potential in nation building activities. Describing the Rural Poverty Report 2011, released recently by the UN International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the IFAD President Kanayo F Nwanze said I quote; "The report makes clear that it is time to look at poor smallholder farmers and rural entrepreneurs in a completely new way - not as charity cases but as people whose Innovation, dynamism and hard work will bring prosperity to their communities".

Programmes should be strengthened to bring about a greater involvement of women in science and technology. These should include measures to motivate girls to take up science and technology for higher education and also ensure that development projects with scientific and technical inputs have total involvement of women. Efforts to develop a scientific temper and awareness should be stepped up.

Our science and technology community, of teachers and researchers, must show us the way ahead. We need a quantum jump which would help us to complete our programme in this direction. This agenda can no longer wait.

We live in an age where human knowledge, based particularly on science and technology, is expanding at an unprecedented pace and in that sort of world, access to knowledge has become the most important determinant of the power and wealth of a country and its place in the comity of nations