

Launch of the FIGGI-Aditya Birla CSR Centre for Excellence New Delhi, 17th February 2010

Theme address by Smt. Rajashree Birla, Chairperson, FICCI Aditya Birla CSR Centre for Excellence

Shri Salman Khurshid, the Honourable Minister for Corporate Affairs & Minority Affairs, Dr. Elaben Bhat, Dr. Amit Mitra, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Today is indeed a red letter day, for us in the Aditya Birla Group, as we gather here for the inauguration of the "FICCI Aditya Birla CSR Centre for Excellence". It is the first of its kind, under the exemplary leadership of Dr. Amit Mitra. It is my honour to be the Chairperson, of what we hope will evolve, into one of the finest Institutions, that will fulfil the unmet needs, of corporates and public enterprises, with a social conscience.

As I stand before you, I am a little nostalgic. Decades ago, Shri G D Birla, my grandfather-in-law, had founded FICCI as a forum, to give voice to corporates engaged in business. Today two generations down the line, we in the Aditya Birla Family are here, setting up with FICCI, an Institution, that far transcends business dictates. An Institution that will selflessly work for, the upliftment of the marginalized sections of society. In many ways, it is a proud moment for us.

In my short speech I will focus briefly on three aspects:

Firstly, on Corporate Social Responsibility and its importance in today's context.

Secondly, share with you the involvement of our Group in this domain.

Thirdly, why have we chosen FICCI for this initiative, and what is the unique bouquet of services that the "FICCI Aditya Birla CSR Centre for Excellence" will provide to industry and NGOs.

So let me begin with the first point - the importance of CSR

For ages, Milton Friedman served as the icon, of those who believed that in a free-enterprise, the only responsibility of business is business. That the prime objective of business must be, to maximize wealth for its stakeholders. This no longer holds true. Business leaders globally are advocating, the concept of social responsiveness. With the new socio-economic order, that we have been witness to, there is a growing need for CSR activities; to move from the back-burner of cheque book philanthropy, to the front, to be main-streamed in the business.

This is even more true of our country. As a nation we face paradoxes and polarities. On the Human Development Index, we rank at the lower end, a 127th! Nearly 40 per cent of our population is not literate. More than 1/3rd of our billion plus, what we call,

"demographic dividend" lives on less than a dollar and a quarter a day. And this is a pity. But at the same time, we take pride in the fact that, we have made a mark on the intellectual world map. India boasts of the world's third largest, scientific and technical manpower. We are reckoned as an economic power house. India is a happening country. But fortunately, inclusive growth is at the center of our national agenda. And the government is very serious about ensuring that this comes true quickly. But the government alone cannot fulfill this task on its own. All of us have to pitch in.

It is my belief that in the times ahead, the largest and the most powerful societal institutions, after the government will be the corporate sector. With their ever increasing clout, will come much larger expectations from corporate, to give back to society voluntarily and perhaps even by regulations, e.g., the education cess.

And this brings me to the second point which I wish to stress. I feel a great sense of fulfillment and pride when I say that the "Aditya Birla Centre For Community Initiatives, and Rural Development" truly makes a substantive difference, to the lives of the under privileged sections of the society. We work not only in India but also around our establishments in Thailand, Egypt and the US. In India, we reach out to 7 million people. The Centre is not motivated by economic considerations. Rather the philosophy of caring and giving is part of the DNA of the Birla family. Today we have a dedicated team of 250 CSR people in this domain, which is anchored by our Group's Corporate Communications spearheaded by Dr. Pragnya Ram. We work in the areas of education, healthcare, sustainable livelihood projects and infrastructure and social reform. We have an articulated CSR vision, which is aligned to our business vision, in a compelling way. In all humility, for us CSR is a calling that we respond to, with evangelical zeal. For us, CSR is not an option. It is an imperative.

However the challenge to bring in an inclusive society is enormous. So, in a far wider move, we are fortunate to have aligned with FICCI to set up the FICCI - Aditya Birla CSR Center for Excellence, to make CSR the culture, a way of life among corporates. .

Why FICCI? FICCI stands for the highest corporate ethics, transparency and accountability. It is exceedingly well networked with business, government and civil society, both in India and globally. Its intellectual capital is unparalleled. It is a reservoir of experience and expertise. Above all, Dr. Mitra who leads this meritocratic chamber is absolutely committed to, making an inclusive society a reality, in the foreseeable future. Of course with the backing of multiple stakeholders, corporates, the government, academia, NGOs, the media and the community. So we thought of FICCI as our ideal partner for the creation of the centre.

What then is the Vision of our Centre? Our aspiration is "To incubate, nurture and accelerate a paradigm of sustainable and inclusive CSR in India and thereby raising the Human Development Index through poverty alleviation."

Our four key goals are: Firstly to provide an enabling environment for business to get engaged in CSR activities.

Secondly, to create a resource pool that will help translate holistic CSR practices into action, and lead to sustainable development, and sustainable livelihoods as well.

Our third goal flows from this, which is to support the capacity building of enterprises, civil society organizations and other stakeholders through multiple partnerships.

Additionally, enlisting artisans, craft hubs, technical institutions, honing vocational skills to enable people stand on their feet, is very much on our center's radar.

Most importantly, the Center will provide strategic and innovative solutions to CSR stakeholders by undertaking baseline studies, needs assessment, stakeholder engagement, program design, project planning, monitoring and evaluation, CSR policy formulation and CSR reporting.

Dr. Amit Mitra and I would like to urge all of you in the corporate as well as in the public sectors to leverage on the expertise and experience of the FICCI Aditya Birla CSR Center for Excellence. We earnestly hope that with this center and FICCI's reach more and more organizations will become genuine social workers and will texture CSR into their business fabric in every possible way. Of course several companies in India are deeply engaged in CSR. But many more need to come into the fold with a sense of passion and commitment, and move beyond bottom-line consideration.

Only if all of us - Stakeholders such as Corporates, the Government, Academia, NGOs and the media pull together, can we bring in a more, inclusive society. An India which can hold its head high in the hegemony of global nations on every measure.

Thank you.