‘Discovering Ability’ Art Awards
Monday 14 November 2019, UNESCO Auditorium, New Delhi

Address by Mr Eric Falt
Director and UNESCO Representative for India, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka

Your Excellency, Mr G Kishan Reddy, Honourable Minister of State for Home Affairs, Government of India,
Our partners, friends from the media, ladies and gentlemen,

A very good evening and welcome to UNESCO New Delhi. We are delighted to have launched the ‘Discover Ability’ Art Awards in partnership with Youth4Jobs and HSBC. As you are no doubt aware, this is the first national platform of its kind in India that recognizes the outstanding talents of artists with disabilities.

UNESCO is proud to host the First Edition of the Awards this evening. The response to the initiative from around the country in the last few months has been overwhelming. We are keen for ‘Discovering Ability’ to become an annual event, attract more talent, and encourage greater numbers of artists with disabilities to explore the livelihood opportunities offered by art.

Today, at least 15 per cent of the global population lives with some form of disability. It is only just that this group of over a billion persons be allowed to participate fully in every sphere of life. Trying to ensure that they can do so, however, presents serious challenges.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development clearly implies that disability cannot be a reason for the inadequate realization of human rights, or poor access to development benefits. Indeed, seven targets and 11 indicators of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals explicitly recommend that the requirements of persons with disabilities be addressed with respect to education, employment and growth, among other areas.

In India, where over 27 million people presently live with some form of disability, the scale of the challenge is formidable. In this context, Your Excellency, UNESCO lauds the Indian Government’s efforts to build a more enabling environment for persons with disabilities through key amendments to the Right to Education Act, the institution of the Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016, and transformative campaigns like Accessible India.

While major strides are certainly being made, collectively we need to do much more to help persons with disabilities in India build better lives. Currently, only one-third of the population of persons with disabilities is able to enter the country’s workforce, and only around 55% of the disabled are able to achieve literacy – often as a result of limited access to education. Together, we must make every effort to improve these statistics.
Creating professional and livelihood opportunities for persons with disabilities is critical. Through the ‘Not Just Art’ initiative and the ‘Discovering Ability’ Art Awards, we are attempting not just to recognize and reward talented artists, but also to help them build market linkages for their work by connecting them with the business and philanthropic sectors. By helping artists showcase their work, we hope to open up income generation opportunities for them through commissions, sales, and institutional acquisitions of their art.

UNESCO’s partnership with Youth4Jobs and HSBC for the ‘Discovering Ability’ Art Awards is guided by our mandate to enable the participation of persons with disabilities in artistic and cultural life. It signals our commitment to empower them to become both mainstream consumers and producers of art forms.

UNESCO’s other recent art-related initiatives in India include our collaboration with the National Gallery of Modern Art to build a permanent, accessible art gallery; and our partnership with the National Museum to build disability-friendly galleries with tactile replicas of cultural artefacts for the visually impaired. Moreover, in the space of the performing arts, UNESCO has supported the creation of dance curricula and learning sessions for children with disabilities.

Additionally, as Your Excellency is aware, UNESCO vigorously promotes inclusive education. Earlier this year, for instance, we launched our flagship State of the Education Report for India, focusing specifically on inclusive education for children with disabilities. We also promote the use of ICTs for persons with disability, particularly to facilitate access to information.

Dear friends, I would like to conclude by congratulating the winning artists who will be felicitated today, those whose work has received a special mention, and the many others who sent in their submissions and who continue to use art to express themselves. Your dedication to your craft and your exceptional work lie at the heart of the ‘Discovering Ability’ initiative. You inspire us. As the Art Awards continue to grow in stature and popularity every year, as we are sure they will, you will remain the pioneers with whom it all began.

Thank you.

*Eric Falt*
*Director and UNESCO Representative for Bhutan, India, Maldives and Sri Lanka*