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All aboard the Science Express

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With a view to create awareness amongst masses in general and youth in particular, about the exceptional biodiversity of India , the "Science Express Biodiversity Special (SEBS) Train was flagged off recently by the Union Minister of Railways, Mr Pawan Kumar Bansal, Minister of Environment and Forests Ms Jayanthi Natarajan and Ms Sheila Dikshit, Chief Minister of Delhi from Safdarjung Railway Station recently. MrÂ T Ramasami, secretary, Department of Science and Technology, Mr K Judesekar, DG, Forests, and senior officers from the participating ministries were also present on the occasion.

This is a collaborative initiative of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) and the Department of Science and Technology (DST), the Indian Railways, the Vikram Sarabhai Community Science Center, and the Center for Environment Education. It has also engaged a large number of knowledge partners, state biodiversity boards, state education agencies, state nodal agencies on NGC and NEAC, government officials, peoples' representatives, colleges and academia, civil society organizations and the media.

Under the second phase of program, the SEBS will cover 62 stations over next six months. Of the 16 coaches of Science Express- Biodiversity Special, eight are solely dedicated to showcasing the myriad biodiversity spread across all the biogeographical zones of India through a variety of interactive exhibits, short films and videos that are shown on plasma and LED TV screens, large format displays, kiosks, backlit panels, and so on.

The rest of coaches have interesting and informative exhibits on climate change, energy and water conservation and topical issues in science. The popular Joy of Science Lab is mounted in an exclusive coach in which students are guided to perform various experiments and activities to understand concepts of various themes projected in the train. In addition, on the railway platform where the train is halted, young visitors are encouraged to play several exciting games as well as participate in quizzes, painting competitions, elocutions, and just-a-minute. The window panes of the entire train have also been judiciously used to put up posters on the numerous species of flora and fauna found in India which keep the visitors engaged while waiting for their turn.

Speaking on the occasion, Ms Jayanthi Natarajan expressed her gratitude to the knowledge partners for creating unique ways of communicating massages. She also announced the commitment of her ministry for running this train in 2014 also. Adding that this will coincide with the final year of India's Presidency of the Conference of Parties (CoP) and perform an important function of bringing biodiversity knowledge to the doorsteps of millions of our countrymen, she said she would look forward to SEBS contributing significantly in our commitment to "Prakriti Rakshati Rakshtam", Nature protects if she is protected. The Railway Minister also spoke about the plans for the Indian railway to gradually introduce bio-toilets in panels coaches.

The Science Express Biodiversity Special (SEBS), a mobile biodiversity exhibition train is a mission to create massive awareness on India's rich biodiversity. SEBS was showcased as India's brand ambassador during recently concluded CBD CoP. The "Science Express: Biodiversity Special" is a unique, state-of-the-art exhibition train that brings biodiversity awareness to a cross section of people, particularly children and youths, as it travels across the country. Rich biocultural diversity of the country in different coaches is organized, biogeographic zone wise, and includes wild, domesticated, marine, microbial life forms, biodiversity and livelihoods, impact of climate change, and highlights the challenges for the conservation. It also shares the policies, law and program/ initiatives of partners, aimed at conservation of countries rich biocultural heritage. The train which previously carried science exhibition has been redesigned into a state-of-the-art biodiversity exhibition, using the expertise of a number of partner institutes of the country.