It's an honour to be present here in this august gathering on the occasion of the birth centenary of one of the great sons of India, Dr Vikram Sarabhai. It is quite appropriate that the event is being held at the place where the remarkable journey of his life and career had begun. He was an outstanding leader, inspiring visionary and an ardent patriot. As I stand today, in his rather big shoes, I would like to take this opportunity to recollect his legacy and contributions to the programmes of the Department of Atomic Energy which he headed from 1966-1971.

His odyssey with the space programme of the country began in fact at the Department of Atomic Energy as Chairman of INCOSPAR. He was subsequently nominated to Atomic Energy Commission as member in 1965 and the Chairman in 1966.

Dr Sarabhai’s love for cosmic phenomenon, space science and satellite communications is well known. However, his gaze did not merely remain directed skywards. On assuming the mantle of Chairman, AEC, he became equally at ease peering into the atoms and grasping its intricacies, thanks to his almost uncanny capability to absorb, store and analyse a vast amount of information and data. The geopolitical ramifications of the development of nuclear energy were equally well understood by him.

At the time when he assumed this responsibility, many of the concepts, ideas and initiatives floated by Dr Homi Bhabha had reached a stage of maturity and were required to be taken forward. Dr. Bhabha had commenced activities from a low technological base in the country, soon after independence. A gradual build up in the arena of nuclear science and technology gave the nation confidence and competence to set forth on a quicker expansion and accelerated growth in the nuclear sector. Dr. Sarabhai set about systematically operationalising many of the nascent activities of the atomic energy programme to accelerate its implementation.

He left his imprint on numerous activities of DAE beginning with the establishment of the Uranium Corporation of India Limited for Uranium mining. During his tenure, the Tarapur Atomic Power Station commenced power production, construction commenced on the Rajasthan Atomic Power Station and the scope of the agreement with the Canadians was enlarged to add additional power stations. He founded the Electronic Corporation of India Limited for building nuclear instrumentation and control systems.
for the reactors. He initiated the process for the construction of several heavy water plants in the country which has today made the country self-sufficient in the production of heavy water. He was instrumental in setting up the facility for fuel fabrication, at Hyderabad, which is today one of the largest fuel fabrication facilities in the world. Variable Energy Cyclotron Centre for carrying out high quality research in nuclear physics and Power Project Engineering Division, the precursor organisation to NPCIL, responsible for construction and operation of Nuclear Power Plants in the country were also established during his tenure.

And above all, he gave thrust to the fast reactor programme of the country by establishing the Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research – formerly known as Reactor Research Centre- at Kalpakkam. This included site selection, commencement of research activities as well as putting into place an agreement with France to collaborate on the fast reactor research.

Each of these activities have grown in scale and stature and are today thriving research centres and production facilities, independently managed but continuing to maintain strong linkages with DAE for synergy in meeting the overall programme objectives. 

Amongst all the sterling qualities that we should imbibe from this great man, the one quality which I think should remain uppermost in our agendas is the need to match inputs in terms of investments and efforts with the outputs and outcomes towards serving the greater good of the nation. He firmly believed that any activity or venture should serve a worthy cause and lead to advancements on some technological front. He approached the programmes of space and nuclear energy with this paradigm uppermost in his mind. This quality of maximising returns which, I too share, perhaps emerges from his Gujarati ethos but also symbolises his strong commitment towards ensuring the optimum use of the precious national resources earmarked for these programmes.

At the end I would like to take this opportunity to salute Dr. Sarabhai for his achievements and contributions which have catalysed not only the growth of space and nuclear science in the country but also for establishing a scientific culture in the nation by building numerous institutes which today stand as islands of excellence. These
model institutes serve as shining beacons to the aspiring youth of this country. I am confident that the array of travelling exhibitions to showcase the activities and achievements of DAE and DOS which shall be put up all over the country during this year will instil a sense of pride and be a source of inspiration to the young students and other visitors and create a chain reaction of discovery and innovation across the country. This is the best tribute that can be paid to this great man and his legacy.

Jai Hind!