

## **SPEECH BY HON'BLE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SMT. PRATIBHA DEVISINGH PATIL**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first of all wish you a very happy New Year and best wishes for all your endeavors.

I am particularly delighted to be here at this meeting of the 6th South Asia Regional Meeting commemorating the World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, in which I had the privilege to participate as a member of the Indian delegation. India is honoured to host this Regional Meeting for the second time. I warmly welcome all delegates and wish them a pleasant stay in India.

It is now over a decade since the Beijing Platform for Action was adopted. It is the time to evaluate our performance in attaining gender equality - a task that still remains incomplete in the world, in our region and in our respective countries.

Amongst countries in our region, India has had a dynamic woman Prime Minister - Smt. Indira Gandhi, similarly Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh have also had such leadership in their countries. However, it is also equally true that a significant proportion of women in our region live below the poverty line and they have not benefited from the process of globalization, resulting in a further "feminization of poverty". The performance of our region on gender related issues clearly has been mixed. This Conference provides an opportunity to share our views and our experiences in implementing decisions taken at the Beijing Conference and a unique opportunity for building fruitful partnerships within the region for gender equality, gender justice and empowerment. I am glad that SAARC is addressing gender issues. I understand that under the SAARC Development Fund, there are two pioneering projects targeting women - Women and Child Care including Immunization and Women Empowerment for home based workers. Such projects should be encouraged in our region.

In India, women took part in our freedom struggle and they fought shoulder to shoulder with men. Recognising their stellar role in the freedom struggle, Pandit Nehru, our first Prime Minister, said, "most of us men folk were in prison. And then a remarkable thing happened. Our women came to the front and took charge of the struggle. Women had always been there of course, but now there was an avalanche of them, which took not only the British Government but their own men folk by surprise". Such is the strength of our women and all that is needed is to give them the opportunities and options for realizing their potential.

The principles of gender equality and protecting the rights and privileges of women and children are enshrined in the Constitution of India, which not only guarantees equality to women at par with men, but it also advocates positive discrimination in favour of women,

wherever necessary. These are reinforced through the passage of new legislations and amendments to existing laws so as to remove any gender bias.

In the political field, by amending the Constitutional provisions, one-third of the seats have been reserved for women leaders in local bodies, both in the rural and urban areas. As a result, more than a million of our women are now politically empowered at the grassroots level.

In India, women play an important role in agriculture operations undertaking 60 percent of farm work and contribute in a big way to food production and economic growth. Women have also increased their participation in high-end vocations. India's economic planning process for women has evolved over the years from a purely "welfare" approach, where women were regarded as objects of charity, to a "development" oriented phase and currently to the plank of "empowerment" that seeks to promote gender equality. We have embarked on our 11th Five Year Plan period that seeks faster, more broad-based and inclusive economic growth by providing more people access to basic infrastructure as well as health and educational services to all. Gender will be a cross cutting theme.

A major milestone in women's empowerment in India has been the Self-Help Group (SHG) movement. We have over 2.2 million Self Help Groups at the grass roots level throughout the country, which translates into more than 33 million households. We extend collateral free loans to these SHGs and many government programmes are also run through these SHGs. Such groups need our continued support and encouragement.

In education, which is the critical factor that empowers participation in the growth process, India has launched the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, that is Education For All. This programme seeks to provide elementary education to all children in the 6 to 14 years age group by 2010 and has a pronounced gender focus, where it seeks to address both in-school and external factors. As a result, we have been able to reduce the gender gap in enrolment and retention at the school level. Through concerted efforts, female literacy has grown significantly from about 40 percent in 1991 to about 54 percent in 2001. The focus is now on improving women's participation in higher education, technical education and vocational courses.

We have also taken great leaps in gender budgeting. More than 52 ministries have set up gender budget cells and our Ministry of Women and Child Development is constantly interacting with these cells - for building capacities and facilitating the integration of gender analysis into the Government's policies, plans, programmes and budgets.

Empowering women is the most effective tool for development as well as for poverty reduction. Women who are educated and have been given a chance, have proved that they excel in their professions and careers. Educated and enlightened women can look after families better, make societies compassionate and make nations progressive.

An agenda for the empowerment of women should cover gender needs and concerns at every stage and sphere of life - from protection in the womb by prohibiting female foeticide, to preventing female infanticide by giving better nutrition and care to the girl child and addressing gender preferences in families, to giving equal education opportunities for the girl child by sensitizing society to look at a girl child as a boon, to making women economically independent by imparting skills to them, to making work places safe for women by having fast track implementation of stringent laws against sexual harassment, to addressing issues like dowry and domestic violence, to making women feel secure by taking strict action against those who indulge in reprehensible acts like teasing and molesting and to allowing women to fully realize their capacities.

Government and society need to work together to ensure that women are facilitated in joining as equal partners in all aspects of the growth of society and the nation as well as to get justice. There is a gap between de-jure and de-facto position regarding the rights of women. The need of the hour is the speedy implementation of legislative and policy measures for empowerment of women. There is often lack of awareness about schemes for promoting welfare and development among women. This results in women not availing of the benefits. This situation needs to be rectified. This can only be achieved through an awareness programme. We need a band of "gender advocates" whose mission is to bring about effective implementation of the policies and programmes for women's empowerment.

Women must also be motivated to fight discrimination. They should work determinedly for their own empowerment. One important step in this direction is imparting physical education - like Judo and Karate - for self-defence to girl students from a very early age so as to make them physically strong and to build-up self confidence to face the challenges of life. Self-defence is the best defence. I am also pleased to note that in India a large number of women are joining the police force. Those who needed protection earlier are now giving protection to others. This is a big change!

It is now time that every individual, particularly those who have the capacity and means, asks the question - what can I do to make a difference to reduce poverty and ignorance and to make the world a place where all, including women too have the opportunity to grow? Your answers and contributions will make a difference to the world. I am reminded of a poem I studied in school. It was :-

If all the trees were one tree, what a great tree it would be;

If all rivers were one river, what a great river it would be;  
and I always feel

If all the women in the world speak in one voice, what a great voice it will be to bring peace, prosperity and happiness in the world.

With these words, I wish your Meeting all success and all the best.

Thank You.

**JAI HIND !**