Twentieth
Women’s Political Empowerment Day Celebrations
22-23 April 2013
Constitution Club, New Delhi

Theme:
Panchayats, Rights and Survival of the Girl Child

Dr. Bidyut Mohanty, Head, Women’s Studies, Institute of Social Sciences (ISS), Dr. George Mathew, Chairman, ISS, Smt. Krishna Tirath, Hon’ble Minister of State for Women and Child Development, Government of India, Mr. Louis Georges Arsenault, Country Representative of UNICEF and Ms. K. Ratna Prabha, Additional Secretary and Mission Director, National Mission for Empowerment of Women. Waving the flag for women’s empowerment.
The Institute of Social Sciences (ISS), New Delhi, organised the Twentieth Women's Political Empowerment Day Celebrations on 22-23 April, 2013, in collaboration with the National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW), UNICEF, ActionAid and Institute of Rural Research and Development (IRRAD), at the Constitution Club of India, Rafi Marg, New Delhi. Over the two days, participants deliberated on the theme: "Panchayats, Rights and Survival of the Girl Child".

The programme was attended by more than 400 elected women panchayat representatives from 18 States and one Union Territory, self help groups, mahila panchayat members, government officers, other social workers and NGO partners. The delegates were sponsored by various State governments and NGOs. It led to practitioners of local governance, eminent scholars and activists, contributing towards the richness of the event with their grassroots experiences and thoughts on the role of Panchayats in the empowerment of women and the future of the girl child.

Dr. Ash Narain Roy, Director, ISS, while delivering the Welcome Address, stated that women, being the epitome of ahimsa, have become essential parts of the new geometry of power that democracy helped create in India. Numerical abundance of children in India must not become a burden due to pervasive malnutrition but should become the source of hope and progress.

Ms. Krishna Tirath, Hon'ble Minister of State for Women and Child Development, appealed to the women delegates from across the country not to tolerate injustice and
women representatives launched this movement for legal empowerment of women. They will be called Peace Ambassadors.

During the Inaugural Ceremony, the Minister honoured Ms. Nayana Patra, Baruan Gram Panchayat, Odisha, Ms. Shushma Bhadu, Dhani Miyan Khan Gram Panchayat, Haryana, and Ms. Sudha Manirathinem, Nattarmangalam Gram Panchayat, Tamil Nadu, as "Outstanding Women Panchayat Leaders 2013" for their exemplary contributions towards the development of their respective Panchayats, with cash awards, citations and plaques.

Mr. Louis Georges Arsenault, Country Representative of UNICEF, said that women's empowerment begins with the emancipation of girl children, who will always be the best investment the country can make. He also reminded delegates that the progress in status of women has not been commensurate with the economic growth of the country and, for this, representation of women must be as strong in State Legislatures and the Parliament as it is in the Panchayats. He reminded the participants that empowerment must begin with education, nutrition, health and welfare of the nation's children, especially the girl child.

Dr. George Mathew, Chairman of the ISS, emphasised that the onus fell on the shoulders of women leaders and citizens in the panchayats to usher in a new era of harassment under any circumstance. The voice of women that is feeble and helpless today must change to become louder, forceful and effective. She also highlighted the effort of National Mission for Empowerment of Women in the emancipation and self-realisation of women in India. She talked about the upcoming scheme of 'Ahimsa Messenger' and informed that twenty elected
change and empowerment, while ensuring dignity of the girl child. Dr. Bidyut Mohanty, Head, Women’s Studies, ISS delivered the vote of thanks. She pointed out that the women present in the meeting would be inspired by the presence of the Hon’ble Minister because, it would encourage them to break the glass ceiling and reach Parliament. Secondly, her response at the clarion call to save the girl child sheds a ray of hope for the bright future of the girl child. In thanking the country representative of UNICEF, she praised their efforts to highlight the plight of the girl child who has been excluded from the high growth of Indian economy.

The two-day event comprised a series of talks by several eminent personalities who are actively involved in the effort to empower women and the girl child, whether through NGOs or the state machinery. These sessions were interspersed with topical films, testimonials and opportunities for participants to share experiences. Poetry recitals and the singing of folk music added further colour to the sessions. These poems and songs filled the Lawn of the Constitution Club of India with a spirit of hope, optimism, and courage.

Ms. K. Ratna Prabha, Additional Secretary and Mission Director, National Mission for Empowerment of Women, delivered the Special Address where she laid out before the participants the challenges of integrating the marginalised sections of the society into the process of governance. Not only do society and the administrative apparatus place obstacles before women but also women themselves often fall prey to years of social and cultural conditioning and become content with their inferior social status. Many elected women representatives wanted to know the reasons behind the growing incidence of violence against the girl child. The incidents of rape in Delhi were referred to again and again. Replying to some of these queries, she said the patriarchal values of the Indian society have conditioned the male psyche which lead to such aberrations.

The plenary session, chaired by Ms. Gouri Choudhuri, President, Action India, and
addressed by Ms. C.P Sujaya, Vice President, Council for Social Development, touched upon several issues faced by women across India including crimes committed against women and girl children. Ms. C P Sujaya, for example, cited many statistics including a worsening sex ratio to show the vulnerability of the girl child. She also highlighted the apathy of the government officers towards elected women representatives, though many of these women take up issues such as drinking water, sanitation, and the monitoring of public distribution on their own. The chairperson Ms. Gouri Choudhury highlighted the plight of the girl child and said that the mahila panchayat members of Delhi and self help groups of Uttar Pradesh, who were present in the convention, have been working on the welfare of the girl child.

The Open House discussion that followed saw active participation by the delegates; so much so that the session became an interface for the government, especially the National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW), to reach out to the representatives of...
the Panchayats. Ms. Rashmi Singh, Executive Director, NMEW, enumerated the various programmes under the Ministry through which the Mission was trying to achieve its goals of empowerment. However, participants admitted to the unfortunate predicament of being aware of only part of those listed programmes. Dr. Nupur Tiwari, Faculty, Indian Institute of Public Administration moderated another Open House discussion during which was addressed by Ms. Niti Saxena, Institute of Research and Development. Dr Bijayalaxmi Nanda elaborated on the issues confronting the rights and survival of girl child. Various panchayat members spoke of their determination to save the girl child and prevent child marriage.

A team led by Mr. Naresh Hasija, Associate Director, Biocon, Bangalore, demonstrated to the participants a 'tele-health-kit', which would enable Panchayats to be active players in providing for public health, that would detect problems of diabetes and blood pressure and is easily operated by common people.

Anwar Jamal’s debut feature film "Swaraj- The Little Republic", produced by Dr. George Mathew, Chairman, ISS, was screened to a very receptive audience who were inspired by the story of Leela and her three women friends who fought against adversities, in the form of upper caste men and a water tanker mafia, in a village in Rajasthan, to get water taps installed in their premises. The feature film has won several awards, including the National Award from the President of India, and has been screened at numerous film festivals across the country and abroad.

An overview on the theme of "Violence against the Girl Child in India" was chaired by Dr. Deepti Mehrotra, Consultant, Knowledge Partnership Programme. Ms. Sunita Menon, Director, Education and Training, Breakthrough, showed a documentary film to depict various social situations of overt and covert violence to which the girl child is subjected and the kind of mental setups she develops while growing up. She emphasized the need for a girl child to be able to live a free life of her choice, free from atrocities and male dominance.
Dr. Sarat K. Nanda, Senior Fellow, ISS, further elaborated on the role of patriarchy in shaping the societal norms and behaviours and how women’s empowerment is being undermined. Dr. Dipali Sharma, ActionAid, chaired the subsequent Open House discussion during which several participants utilised the opportunity to share their experiences in terms of empowerment of women and fighting patriarchy at the local level.

Nayana Patra, one of the awardees, said that in order to improve the female literacy, she collects money from MPs and MLAs and has been able to build a residential Girls’ High School in her panchayat, where her granddaughter now studies. Girl children of her panchayats now don't have to cross a dense forest to reach the school.

Ms. Rita Sarin, Vice President and Country Director, The Hunger Project, chaired session on the theme of “Social Sectors and Discriminations against Women and Children”. Dr. Deepa Ahluwalia, Senior Project Advisor, NMEW, elaborated on the various forms of discriminations faced by women at each age subdivision, and substantiated her presentation with facts and statistics to inspire participants and apprise them about the unenviable reality of the status of women in India.

Ms. Sneha Banerjee, Assistant Professor, Gargi College, University of Delhi, while defining empowerment, equated it with gender equality. She then went on to identify the lifecycle problems faced by the girl child, such as anti-natal and pre-natal neglect, elimination of the foetus, adolescent specific anxiety etc, and discussed what women leaders can do. Finally she acknowledged that women have achieved some degree of empowerment after two decades of seventy-third Amendment Act-1993.

The valedictory session was chaired by Dr. Mohini Giri, Chairperson, Guild of Service who called upon the women delegates to be courageous amidst all adversities.

Dr. Satish Agnihotri, Director General, Defence Acquisition, Ministry of Defence delivered the valedictory address and shared his thoughts on the future of the girl child in India. He advised the women leaders present there to compel the candidates seeking votes from them to take the initiative
in bringing about police reforms. More specifically, he said that each police station should have a women cell to look after women's issues. As a result the police station related violence would decrease.

Dr. George Mathew expressed his happiness at being able to successfully celebrate the Women’s Political Empowerment Day since 1994. This celebration, every year from then on, has made an enormous impact on women’s participation in public life and on their meaningful leadership at various levels of the Panchayats. He led the participants in a pledge to fight against all odds for the protection and empowerment of the girl child and to remind each other to take inspiration from the slogan, "Yes, We Can".

Dr. Santosh Singh, Senior Researcher, ISS gave the Vote of Thanks, bringing the memorable two-day celebrations to a worthy conclusion.
Nayana Patra, Ward member, Village Maluagoda, Baruan Gram Panchayat, Bhuban block, Dhenkanal district, Odisha

Nayana Patra was elected in 2002 and 2007 as ward member from Malluagoda village for Baruan gram panchayat of Dhenkanal district.

As ward member, Nayana was instrumental in setting up a school for girls in Maluagoda, with her mission being total child education. Overcoming extraordinary difficulties, Nayana established a residential school for girls. Today, more than 150 girls are enrolled in this school. Nayana’s determination to fight against overwhelming odds and her dedication to improving children’s education has brought her success and laurels. As a leader, she oversees the functioning of the school authorities and monitors its activities.

Nayana has ensured land rights patta to 25 landless villagers, the digging of ponds, and the protection of a 250-acre Sal forest with active cooperation from the village women, who patrol the forest in small groups carrying a stick in the hand in rotation. Nayana has also facilitated the planting of 1000 cashew plants on unused government land.

Another noteworthy initiative was the anti-liquor campaign. With the support of the women in the panchayat, Nayana collected fines from men who were drunk and violent, and used the money to build toilets. Nayana has also formed a group called “Adivasi Harijan Sangha”, and she gains confidence through Manch meetings.

Nayana is committed to preventing atrocities against women. She regularly organises women’s meetings, and has formed entrepreneurial self-help groups. Today there are 15 women’s self help groups (SHGs) with more than 200 members. She led the village women in their drive towards an improvement in household economy, better livelihoods and greater dignity, and has been instrumental in facilitating the acquisition of loans for women’s groups, for the purpose of goat/sheep rearing and vegetable cultivation.

This award is given to Ms Nayana Patra for her outstanding work and leadership in her panchayat.

Ash Narain Roy
Director
V. Sudha Manirathinem, President, Nattarmangalam village panchayat, Kattumannar koil Block, in Cuddalore district, Tamil Nadu.

V. Sudha Manirathinem has been president of the Nattarmangalam Village ‘All-Women’ Panchayat since 2011. Before becoming president of the panchayat, she worked as a school teacher, and was fully involved in social and development work in the area.

With her Scheduled Caste (SC) background, she has taken some exceptionally bold steps in this General Category Panchayat. Her most notable achievements include total eradication of the use of plastic bags in the entire panchayat area and total sanitation in the village. She mobilised voluntary contributions for this cause, and approached different philanthropic groups to raise funds for toilet construction. Out of 750 families, only three houses had toilets when she was first elected, but today all households have toilets. In addition, separate toilet facilities have been provided for men and women in common places and are maintained by self-help groups.

In another significant move, V. Sudha’s panchayat prepared an annual plan and budget, which was submitted to the higher level before the stipulated date. This showed an increase of 42 per cent on ‘own income source’ over a period of one year. Moreover, the collection of 100 per cent of taxes (house tax, water tax and profession tax) against total dues including arrears has been achieved over the last three years.

All the 12 mandated panchayat committee meetings were held with full attendance. Eight Gram Sabha meetings were held, which is double the mandated number of four, with participation from more than 70 percent of women and an impressive proportion of SCs. Water tank facilities were provided and 2500 tree plantations have been completed in one year, all of which were duly maintained by self-help groups. Water ponds in the village have been fully de-silted and provision has been made to protect the water level. Two Anganwadi shops, 214 houses for the victims of the “Thane cyclone”, and cemented roads have been constructed. A common burial ground facility for all communities and religions was built, along with a facility for harvesting rainwater.

Since her election, there has been no looking back. Today, V. Sudha works with women’s groups to help all the people in her panchayat. She is unstoppable in her quest. Today, V. Sudha, is an inspiration to many rural women in the country.

Ash Narain Roy
Director

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Shushma Bhadu, Sarpanch, Dhani Miyan Khan Gram Panchayat, Fatehabad district, Haryana

Shushma Bhadu took the decision to enter public life and, in June 2010, was elected as Sarpanch of the Dhani Miyan Khan Gram Panchayat, in Fatehabad district, Haryana. Since assuming charge as President of the Panchayat, Shushma has been working hard to instil confidence amongst the women in her community. She belongs to the Bishnoi community, in which women, following centuries-old traditions, wore the veil to show respect towards their elders. Shushma found this ‘Purdah’ practice restrictive and wanted to break free from this outdated belief. One day, therefore, she removed her veil in a public meeting and asked for everybody’s support to do the same. Her actions have since inspired every woman in Dhani Miyan Khan village to discard the veil.

This marked just the beginning of a revolutionary change Shushma brought about in her village. She built a centre to train women in tailoring, and even secured funding from a bank to sponsor them. A winner of Nirmal Gram Puruskar, Shushma convinced the state government to invest in a water-boosting system to provide access to water for all villagers. Shushma ensured that every child in her village went to school, and now Dhani Miyan Khan has a zero percent school dropout rate. In terms of sex ratio, the village is far better than many others in the state, with 426 female and 416 male residents. Shushma has since announced scholarships for poor girls wishing to pursue higher studies, and the village panchayat has decided to pay all living and educational expenses of girls in the village that belong to poor families.

Shushma introduced rewards for whistleblowers to expose families that use sex determination tests. She has announced a cash prize of Rs 51,000 to anyone providing a tip-off about sex-determination tests or illegal abortions in the area. She succeeded in convincing 12 villages to take action on the issue. Following a resolution, the panchayat administered an oath to those present against gender-based discrimination. Today, Shushma continues to fight against archaic practices of female foeticide, dowry and domestic violence.

Ms Shushma Bhadu has proved to be the true Iron lady of her village. She receives this award for her outstanding leadership and inspiring work.

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