25th
Women’s Political Empowerment Day Celebrations
24-25 April 2019
Theme: Panchayats, Women and Disaster Management

Outstanding Women Panchayats Leaders Awards 2019 - winners:
From left: Ms. Asha Devi Sharma, Elected Member of Zilla Parishad in Jaipur,
Ms. Luxmi Devi, Pradhan, Hurang Gram Panchayat (Kanda) Solan, Himachal Pradesh,
Ms. Sajimol Francis, Member, District Panchayat Alappuzha, Kerala,
Ms. Tahira Bano, Panch, Qazi Pora, Tangmarg, Baramulla, Jammu and Kashmir
The Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi, organised a two-day national conference on “Panchayats, Women and Disaster Management” on 24-25 April 2019. It was on the occasion of the 26th anniversary of the 73rd Constitution Amendment, which made Panchayats (rural local governments) “institutions of self government”.

More than 200 elected women Panchayat representatives from all over the country participated in the programme.

When the 73rd Constitution Amendment, with its provision of not less than one-third of seats reserved for women became Part IX of the Constitution on 24th April 1993, the Institute took the initiative to celebrate this historic day as “Women’s Political Empowerment Day” at the national level since 1994 bringing together thousands of elected women Panchayat representatives to New Delhi.

Ms. Shabnam Sinha, Lead Education Specialist, the World Bank, and Ms. Nandita Baruah, Country Representative, Asia Foundation were the Guests of Honour at the inaugural function.

Dr. Ash Narain Roy, Director, Institute of Social Sciences, welcomed the guests and participants in the conference. He spoke about the climate
change, like shifting weather patterns and rising sea levels, and its impact. He emphasised that the people who are socially, economically, culturally or otherwise marginalized suffer the most. Dr. Roy explained as to what needs to be done to empower women in traditional skills and knowledge to build climate resilience.

Ms. Shabnam Sinha congratulated the Institute of Social Sciences for organizing the event, which was close to both the World Bank’s objectives in India as well as to her, personally. Ms. Sinha said that the worst disaster was when women were denied the position they deserve and were not sufficiently empowered to become part of the mainstream. Quoting Swami Vivekananda, she said that when women are released from oppression they become lionesses.

According to Ms. Sinha, the World Bank’s data shows that 48% of the Indian population is women, which brings forth the question why the women’s participation cannot be 50 percent, especially in the job arena. The percentage of women in the labour force has also decreased from 28% to 24% in the last decade, which is a matter of great concern. Over the years, The World Bank has undertaken a number of initiatives by providing
assistance to the Union and State governments to empower women. Through the project: SANKALP The bank supports national and state governments ($250 million) in innovative approaches for women’s participation in the labour force like providing flexible timings, skills vouchers for more choice, child care facilities and other comprehensive facilities.

Ms. Sinha stated that wage differentials between men and women are also an issue of serious concern that can be combated to a certain extent through improving the skills of women upon entering the labour market. These measures have led to a slow but steady progress in their status, but it definitely has a long way to go. According to Ms. Sinha, the panchayat members should raise these issues in their respective panchayats.

Ms. Nandita Baruah in her address said that she is proud to address the gathering of women panchayat members from all over India and thanked the Institute of Social Sciences for providing this opportunity. She spoke about the initial skepticism when in 73rd and 74th amendment came about, and people felt that it is just symbolic gesture, which would not make any great change for women's empowerment. However, today we find that this space has been effectively claimed by elected women representatives to think for themselves and to use this opportunity to empower other women.

Ms. Baruah threw light on the earthquake that took place during her stay in Nepal in 2015. She mentioned that absence of elected women representatives posed a great challenge to supporting women and girls in post disaster situation. Though several disaster preparedness trainings were held in Nepal before the disaster but the lack of structured operational systems at the local level defeated the practical applicability of the trainings post- disaster. Today 91% of the deputy positions—deputy mayors in municipalities and vice chairpersons in rural municipalities in Nepal are
women and they are being trained on disaster risk reduction. She said that, It is also important that elected women leaders learn to question and challenge the patriarchal value system and provide a more inclusive frameworks for empowering not just women but the community as whole. India has the strong backbone of over 33% elected women representatives across the country, and they can be the real change makers for India.

Outstanding Women Panchayat Leaders Awards 2019 were presented to Ms. Tahira Bano, Member, Qazi Pora Panchayat, Tangmarg, Kashmir; Ms. Sajimol Francis, Member, District Panchayat, Alapuzha, Kerala; and Ms. Luxmi Devi, President, Hurang Gram Panchayat (Kanda), Solan, Himachal Pradesh. The Institute also honoured Smt. Asha Devi Sharma, Panchayati Raj leader from Rajsthan, with Commendation Certificate for her pioneering work in the field of grassroots governance and for her passion and commitment to the cause of the Panchayati Raj.

Smt. Krishna Raj, Hon’ble Union Minister of State for Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, was the Special Guest of this year’s Women’s Political Empowerment day celebrations. In her address Hon’ble Minister stated that she was happy to see that the Panchayats, which were the backbone of the country, from where guidelines of development take its genesis, are represented by women. According to her, traditionally we have depended on the observations from nature to tell us the weather and climatic conditions. Now there is a pressing need to go back to those methods and be in sync with the nature in order to predict the changing climate.

Hon’ble Minister observed that the elected men and women have always played a decisive role in the country’s progress. Women were never disempowered but it was the society which told them that they were weak. She concluded by focusing that women have been able to excel in most fields by taking things in their own hands.
Prof. Amita Singh, Chairperson, Special Centre for Disaster Research, Jawaharlal Nehru University, said that the citizens and the elected representatives should have a better understanding of our country’s capabilities and utilize this knowledge to strengthen the governance of our cities and villages. She said that the times have changed and the Panchayats have become more sophisticated, which has helped researchers and policymakers to conduct decisions with the Panchayat leaders at different levels, which was previously not possible.

Prof. Singh shared her experience in working with the research team in Kerala, which studied the environmental issues in the state. One of the problems that the state faced was the increase in the number of juvenile fish species in the sea. Excessive fishing has led to the startling decrease in the adult fishes, and the juvenile fishes were making a serious impact on the livelihood of the fishermen. These data were ignored during the researches that were conducted and hence did not find a place in the government policies related to environment.

Dr. Meera Sethi, Migration Policy Consultant, UN International Organisation for Migration (Retd.) in her speech addressed two major issues:
(1) In Local governance, panchayat, especially women play the most important role in disaster management. The central government policies cannot be implemented unless the grassroots organisations are empowered. In India out of 29 states and 7 union territories, 22 states are disaster prone (floods, drought, cyclone, earthquakes, landslides, avalanche). Nearly 50.6% of India’s land is prone to earthquake, 40 million hectares/floods and river erosions, 64% of agricultural land is prone to drought. (2) The affect of climate change and environmental disasters on migration has not been heeded by the national disaster management strategies. None of the plans in these disaster management strategies work on migrant problems.

Dr. Sethi underlined that the panchayati women are the key partners for disaster management and the incidence of any kind of disaster, is up to the panchayat to go about implementing the necessary actions under the government policy.

Eminent scholars and academics, besides the Institute’s Senior Faculty members, addressed the plenary, group and special sessions, including Col. Sanjay Srivastav, Chairperson, Climate Resilient Observing-Systems Promotion Council (CROPC); Dr. G. Prasanna Kumar, Director, Haryana Institute of Public Administration; Mr. Pankaj Anand, Director – Programme and Advocacy, Oxfam India; Dr. Sangeeta Dhal, Kalindi College, University of Delhi; Dr. Babita Verma, Associate Professor Lakshmibai College, Delhi University.

Mr. Pankaj Anand, Dr. G. Prasanna Kumar, Dr. Sangeeta Dhal, Prof. Tulsi Patel
Group discussions were held on the themes: (1) “Disaster Management: Challenges for Rural Women”, chaired by Dr. Sujata Singh, Senior Fellow, ISS (2) “Role of Panchayats in implementing Techniques of Disaster Management”, chaired by Dr. Sanjeev Kumar, Department of Political Science, Zakir Hussain College, University of Delhi, and (3) “Challenges women face while implementing the Disaster Management programme”, chaired by Ms. Shubhra Pant Kothari, Department of Political Science, Zakir Hussain College, University of Delhi.

Dr. Anjana Mangalagiri chairing the plenary session on future risks and measure to tackle the risks, highlighted areas regarding management of disasters that had been posed by silent disasters, unexpected and uninformed disasters, use of technology to manage disasters and future measures. Moreover, there is a need for ISS to facilitate the establishment of informal networking mechanisms amongst women panchayat leaders across states for sharing of, and learning from experiences.

Prof. Partha Ghosh, Senior Fellow, ISS, was delighted to note that the four best performance awardees belonged to four different communities, Muslim, Christian, Dalit and Upper Caste Hindu. This was the only way to build a humane India. He appealed to the assembled women to rise above societal pettiness and do whatever possible by keeping human concern as their priority goal.
Professor Darwis Khuduri, Convener of Bandung Spirit, (University of Lehavre, France) stated that equality between men and women is one of the major aims of Bandung Declaration. Basic principles of *panchsheel* highlighted equality, liberty, dignity and mutual coexistence with women’s movement.

Dr. Bidyut Mohanty: Head, Women Studies, Institute of Social Sciences, during the program underlined that women are the reservoir of the traditional knowledge regarding the management of disaster. She thanked all participants and highlighted the courage of women present in the event. Women suffer most when the natural disaster strikes.

Open House session: Prof. Sarbjit Singh Chhina, Dr. James Arputharaj, Ms. Shalini Raina
Prof. Om Prakash Mathur, HUDCO Chair Professor, ISS. Chaired the Valedictory Session. Having lived in Japan for seven years he said the disaster management is an integral part not only of the development paradigm of Japan but also it is a part of everyone’s day-to-day living. The way the Japanese live, work and move around centres that are implicit in Tsunamis and earthquakes - is common recurrence in that country.

According to Prof. Mathur India is also disaster prone. There are 66 coastal districts spread over 9 States that are subject to sea flooding and have in recent years, faced floods resulting in damage to lives and property.

Shri Mani Sankar Aiyar, former Union Minister for Panchayati Raj, Govt. of India, was the chief guest of the Valedictory Session. In his valedictory address Mr. Aiyar stated that the UN Human Development Index (HDI) which entails the strategic ranking of nations based on their development (political, economical and social), states that India is one of the fastest developing nations of the world. However, this is only economical and India lags in social aspects. Mr. Aiyar said that one major reason is the low representation of women in Parliament and State assemblies. However if the HDI takes into account the representation of women in local governance, our real development would be evident. He further said that research shows that the total number of elected women representatives in India is more than the elected women representatives around the world.
Dr. George Mathew in his closing remarks expressed his appreciation for the successful two-day programme to celebrate 26th year of the 73rd Constitution Amendment. It was all possible because of the dedicated, courageous women representatives who had come from various States to participate. Due to hard work of these women representatives in their respective states, their reservation has increased from 33% to 50% in almost all the States. Dr. Mathew emphasized the need for strengthening the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the country for a better future. On his calling, the participants raised the slogan ‘Our Panchayats, Our Future’.

Dr. Ash Narain Roy, Director, Institute of Social Sciences, proposed a vote of thanks.

An enthralling experience was the cultural evening on 24 April. The women representatives from Maharashtra, Himachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Kerala and Rajasthan performed various folk dances.

The Institute of Social Sciences would like to mention here its deep appreciation for The World Bank and the Asia Foundation for sponsoring the Women’s Political Empowerment Day Celebrations 2019 on the theme “Panchayats, Women and Disaster Management”.

Section of the audience
Our Panchayats

Cultural Programme

Our Future
Elected unanimously in 2012 as Panch of Qazipora Gram Panchayat, Tangmarg Block, Baramullah District of Jammu and Kashmir, she was again reelected in 2018. Ms Tahira Bano has done sterling work and displayed imaginative leadership in ensuring timely disbursement of widow pensions, old age pension, marriage benefits for girls and scholarships for youths.

Working in conflict areas can be extremely daunting, more so for women belonging to the weaker sections of the society. However, thanks to her tireless efforts and steely resolve, Ms Bano has succeeded in resolving a staggering figure of around 3000 such cases. She solved 725 cases of widow pension, 1151 sanctioned cases of old age pension, 550 AAY cases, 734 cases of gas connections, 221 loan cases, and 251 cases of marriage benefits. Her work under the Swachh Bharat Scheme is equally laudable. She played an instrumental role in the construction of 2031 toilets in the Gram Panchayats. She also helped villagers by providing 654 MNREGA cards. Women’s empowerment for Tahira is essential for societal change.

Under her leadership, 100 Self Help Groups have been established providing trainings in skill development. Post training completion, they are connected with banks in order to help them access loans to be able to create their own successful units, thereby making each person self-reliant.

Ms Tahira Bano has also made strenuous efforts in organizing awareness camps for women and girls, innovative work for the community development in the social sector and placing emphasis on resource mobilization, education, infrastructure development and environmental issues.

This award is given to Ms Tahira Bano to recognize her exceptional work. She is a role model for young women, particularly those who come from weaker sections and aspire to become leaders of tomorrow.

Ash Narain Roy
Director
Ms. Luxmi Devi, President of Gram Panchayat Hurung, Kasauli Block, Solan District, Himachal Pradesh, has the distinction of holding the post of Pradhan for the past 23 years. In her long stint, she has prioritized social and economic development in her Panchayat. She has taken care to ensure that the benefits of various schemes like Gandhi KutirYojana, Indira AwaasYojana, Atal AwaasYojana and Pradhanmantri AwaasYojana go to the intended beneficiaries.

With a deep concern for girl’s education and women’s development, Ms Luxmi created two mahila mandals in the village. Thanks to her hard work from 2005 to 2011, her gram panchayat was selected for Madhya Haryali Pariyojana in the sphere of forest reforestation. Her impressive work include construction of check-dams to stop land erosion, drinking water tanks, artificial ponds, to name a few.

Ms Luxmi got high voltage transformers and generators installed in her panchayat to ensure regular and adequate electricity supplies. Under SwachhtaAbhiyan, she went to every household in the village underlining the importance of cleanliness.

She played an instrumental role in creating Ayurvedic dispensary, veterinary hospital, 300 solar street lights and Panchayat Bhavan in the gram panchayat. Throughout her journey as a pradhan, her efforts have been to empower the people economically whether under MNREGA or Gramin Haat and other schemes of financial assistance.

Being a Dalit, Ms Luxmi Devi faced constant rebukes and casteist slur, but she proved her mettle by her hard work and strong determination to transform her panchayat. She turned her own adversity into opportunity for better performance.

This award is given to Ms Luxmi Devi in recognition of her distinguished services. She is a role model for young women, particularly those who come from weaker sections and aspire to become leaders of tomorrow.
Ms Sajimol Francis, Member of the Alappuzha District Panchayat since 2015, has risen from the grassroots level and served in all the three tiers of the panchayati raj system. In 2005 she was elected member of the Pattanakkad Panchayat and then became a member of the Pattanakkad Block Panchayat in 2010.

Pattanakkad Panchayat was one of the worst affected areas by the Tsunami of 2004. On getting elected as panchayat member in 2005, Ms Francis directed all her efforts to constructing more than 450 houses for the Tsunami victims. In 2015, as Block Panchayat Member she moved heaven and earth and saved many cancer patients in her block with the special support from the Government.

Of all human qualities, courage is the most important because it guarantees all others. Ms Francis displayed precisely this during the devastating floods in Kerala in August 2018. No leader can ever be viewed as exceptional unless she/he has it in spades.

Under her leadership, commendable work was done during the flood that devastated the state. More than 500 fishermen were sent for more than a week to Alapuzha, Chengannur, Ernakulam and Aluva – the worst affected areas – on 50-60 boats for rescuing and rehabilitating the victims. As the whole world noticed, fishermen/women became Kerala’s new army. At great risks to their own lives, the they reached food, clothes and medicines to those who were severely affected. The rescue team work was heroic and exemplary. Children got their study materials which were destroyed by the flood waters. Under the leadership of Sajimol Francis several flood relief camps were set up to provide temporary shelter for the affected people.

This award is given to Ms Sajimol Francis in recognition of her pioneering work, particularly during the 2004 Tsunami and the flood calamity in 2018. A true leader is one who knows the way but also shows the way.
Ms. Asha Devi Sharma has been a grassroots worker since the mid-1980s, championing the cause of women’s empowerment. Given her stellar performance and commitment to the Panchayati Raj system, she was elected member of Zilla Parishad in Jaipur in 2005. She is a perfect blend of social activism and electoral politics at the grassroots. Ms Sharma has done excellent work for the education of the girl child using NGO platforms. Other areas where she has left a mark include: developmental work like road construction, water supply and electrification. She has been taking part in the meetings of gram sabha, panchayat samiti and district council. She has travelled extensively across India and Nepal and taken part in meetings on climate change.

Ms Sharma is an ardent supporter of local government associations, for she believes that associations will ensure the panchayati raj system inclusive, strong and sustainable. She is associated with the Association of Local governance of India (ALGI) since 2005. She is currently the Vice-President of ALGI.

This Commendation is given to Ms Asha Devi Sharma for her pioneering work in the field of grassroots governance and for her passion and commitment to the cause of the Panchayati Raj

Asha Narain Roy
Director