



**SPEECH OF THE HON'BLE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SMT. PRATIBHA DEVISINGH PATIL, AT
THE SEMINAR ON 'WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT'**

TIRUPATI, 6TH JULY 2011

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very happy to participate in the Seminar on 'Women Empowerment' organised by the Rashtriya Seva Samithi (RASS). Founded in 1981, it is a body with which Dr. Nirmala Deshpande was associated with for a decade. As a true Gandhian, she spent her life working for the implementation of the vision of Mahatma Gandhi, and also walked over 40,000 kilometres for the Bhoodan Movement of Acharya Vinoba Bhave. She was a woman of great strength and never paused in her work. On the many occasions, when I met her during our long association, I found that her commitment to social causes was passionate and ceaseless. I am glad that her work for promoting harmony and national integration through welfare programmes and development projects, is being carried forward by organisations like RASS.

Mahatma Gandhi's inspiring leadership of our Freedom Movement attracted millions of men and women, young and old, rich and poor, in large numbers into the national political mainstream. His calls, whether for non-cooperation or the Dandi March or the Quit India Movement, saw women coming forward valiantly, without a trace of fear, to free their country from colonial rule. It was, therefore,

a logical extension that when India attained independence and adopted its Constitution, it provided for women to be full participants in the affairs of the nation, without any discrimination. Constitutional rights were followed up with legislative measures for women. This did help women to make remarkable contributions in many fields and to achieve excellence, but a large number of women are still to emerge from their limiting circumstances and achieve their full potential. Much work needs to be done; there are many miles to go, before the status of women can meet the expectations of Acharya Vinoba Bhave who had said, "Women's social, family and political rights and responsibilities should be exactly the same as men's."

Indeed, just as a chariot has two wheels, men and women are the two wheels of a nation. Both have to be equally strong to surge ahead in a balanced way. If one of them is weak, it slows down the pace of the nation itself. We cannot afford this. Hence, it is important that many issues related to women be addressed. It is deeply shameful and a matter of concern that social evils like female infanticide, female foeticide, child marriage, dowry, and crime against women exist. The hallmark of a secure nation is when its women are secure. Any crime against women should not be tolerated and the perpetrators should be dealt with most severely. Also, social evils have to be eradicated. Changes will happen by altering social attitudes and by overcoming prejudices. This will require a social movement, an awareness campaign that spreads the understanding that a daughter is as precious as a son.

The ingrained preference in our society for sons over daughters has often made the girl child an unwelcome entrant to a family. Gandhiji had observed, "The birth of a girl spreads gloom, whereas the birth of a boy is considered to be a festive occasion. So long as this evil custom is not done away with root and branch, women can make no progress whatsoever. Man and woman will attain equality only when the birth of a girl is celebrated with as much joy as in the case of a boy." If we look at the population figures and the trends, we will, however, find little joy as they reflect a continuing preference for sons. In the 0-6 year child group, the 2011 provisional Census figures show that the female population ratio is 914 - the lowest since our independence. I think it is a sad situation, an imbalance that will have a negative impact on society. Where will

there be brides or sisters, mothers and grandmothers - relationships that make a family, a unit? A woman is a critical determinant of the future. As the mother she imparts values to the future generation. It is said that God created mother because He could not be everywhere. A mother is a symbol of love, affection and sacrifice. So, if a woman disappears, many of these human emotions will also disappear from our lives. As a member of society, she makes it stable and more humane and imparts an emotional content to society. As a citizen of the country, she can contribute to its productivity, its growth, prosperity and well being.

Gender equality is not an agenda of women versus men; rather men should be partners in the empowerment of women. In our country, men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Jyotirao Phule - have been at the forefront in fighting for women's causes. Girls when given education and opportunities have excelled in studies, in sports, in arts, in the sciences and have brought laurels not only to their families, but to the nation. They are no less than boys. Hence, health, education and capacity building, which would equip them to avail of income generating opportunities, are basic and essential tools of empowerment.

Education widens the horizons of opportunities. Now with the Right to Education having become a fundamental right, all girls and boys of our country will receive free and compulsory primary education. Our endeavours should be to prevent drop-outs of girls from schools, and to ensure that a large number of girls continue their higher studies. We have to also vastly improve female literacy. Educated women can be the voices in the fight against the discrimination and biases that exist in society against women. This places her in a position to be a driver of change and growth in a rising India. They can help other women, who are not so fortunate to have been educated, in making them socially aware, self-reliant and self-confident. They can counsel other women and share experiences about career choices, entrepreneurship, as well as in matters like nutrition and childcare. India's burden of maternal, newborn and child mortality is one of the highest in the world and needs to be addressed. Access to and affordability of healthcare, especially for women and children, are tasks that must be accomplished.

Another critical aspect is the economic empowerment of women which will make women financially self reliant, giving them confidence and a sense of self esteem. Self Help Groups movement have been a useful tool for bettering lives. By pooling their skills and resources, however meagre, women have undertaken income generating activities. Building the capacities of Self Help Groups through better training in organizing themselves, so that they can have better access to credit facilities, as well as widen their market outreach, will further strengthen them. Women, when actively drawn into the planning and development process, can bring issues impacting them to the forefront, and with this aim in view, Government of India has launched the National Mission for the Socio-economic Empowerment of Women. I am happy that at the grassroots level in our elected bodies in villages and towns, there are over a million elected women representatives.

Government, Civil Society, local communities and women themselves, would have to work in coordination for the vast agenda of women's empowerment. Organisations like the Rashtriya Seva Samithi have been involved with welfare activities for women for a long time. They can play a major catalytic role in bringing about change. I wish the organisation and its President, Dr. G. Muniratnam, all success in their endeavours.

Thank you.

Jai Hind