

**SPEECH BY THE OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE AT  
THE 20<sup>TH</sup> JUSTICE SUNANDA BHANDARE MEMORIAL  
LECTURE ON 'WOMEN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE'**

Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi: November 12, 2014

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1. I am happy to be here this evening to deliver the 20<sup>th</sup> Justice Sunanda Bhandare Memorial Lecture. Late Justice Bhandare was a champion of women's rights. She distinguished herself equally by her professionalism and her concern for the under-privileged. Her untimely death at the age of 52 brought a sad end to a great and prosperous career.
2. This Memorial Lecture, I understand, is organized annually in her memory and also to promote the goal of women's empowerment which was close to her heart. I appreciate the motto of Justice Sunanda Bhandare Foundation: "*The Freedom to Choose, The Right to Excel*" for every woman. Justice Bhandare believed that women should be empowered to be the architects of their own destiny. I hope the members of the Foundation will continue to work towards realizing the ideals she stood for.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

3. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, two world wars saw the emergence of 'human rights' campaign, where all human beings are born free and equal in dignity. Based on the three pillars of equality, dignity and safety, there is increasingly a global focus on the empowerment of women. However, women continue to battle stereotypes and prejudices. George Bernard Shaw had said and I quote: "*Progress is impossible without change and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything*" (unquote). We have to mitigate the pressures, prejudices and inequitable systems which have prevailed for millennia against women.
  
4. We are today living in a knowledge society, where women have competed with men to show that they are equally gifted. Women have excelled in various professions be it medicine, administration, teaching or banking. We have seen how a knowledge-driven society is creating opportunities for women to excel, to rise in positions of power, and overcome hurdles to becoming icons in society.

5. We have to mitigate the roadblocks which deprive women from becoming agents of change. If women are inadequately represented in the productive efforts of our economy, it not only prevents them from contributing to the well-being of their own families but also hampers social progress and retards the overall economic progress in the country.
6. Our Constitution, through its provisions seeks to create an egalitarian society guaranteeing equality. It also exhorts the State to take positive action in this direction. Through policies, programmes and legislations, we have laid emphasis on bringing about all-round development of women. To protect the rights and legal entitlements of women, the National Commission for Women was established in 1992 by an Act of Parliament of 1990.
7. Women-centric legislations have given women confidence to take ownership of their destiny. Through the Seventy Third and Seventy Fourth Amendments to our Constitution, seats are reserved for women in the local bodies enabling them to participate in political decision-making at local levels. A

National Policy for Empowerment of Women was adopted in 2001.

8. Our country has also ratified various international conventions, accepting the obligation to secure equal rights for women. Towards this goal, the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was ratified by us in 1993.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

9. Violence against women takes ugly forms like foeticide and infanticide, molestation and rape, sexual harassment, acid attack and even murder. This threat is prevalent everywhere - at home, workplace, educational institutions, streets, parks and in public transport. To tackle violence against women, it is important that cooperation of all stakeholders – the state, the police and other public authorities, non-governmental agencies, social activists and the community – is absolutely necessary. A society which cannot respect women, cannot be called a civilized society.
10. The Indian Judiciary has been pro-active in protecting the rights of women by promoting gender justice. The Vishaka guidelines to counter sexual harassment at the workplace, the

right of a mother to be regarded as the natural guardian of her child, the right of minority women to adopt children, and the regulation of the sale of acid, are examples of this.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

11. We need more women in decision-making structures. While 33 percent reservation for women at the panchayat level has had some success, representation of women at other tiers of the government is unfortunately poor. Women members of parliament comprise a mere 11.3 percent in the present Lok Sabha. This is well below the global average of 21.8 percent and even below the Asian average of 18.4 percent.
12. According to the report of the Association for Democratic Reform, in the General Elections 2014, women candidates got an average of 8 percent of the nominations distributed by various political parties.
13. Women have become Ministers, Governors, Ambassadors and Judges but their representation is not enough for them to play the role of change agents in an effective way. In the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index for 2014,

India has been ranked a lowly 114<sup>th</sup>, below Brazil, Russia and China, and even Cuba, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. This position must be changed.

14. To bridge the gender disparity gap in our country, we require positive intervention in areas such as education, economic empowerment and governance. We have to strengthen the systems and processes that facilitate women to take control and claim ownership of their lives. To lend true meaning to empowerment, we have to expand their freedom of choice.
15. As poor women are often ill-equipped to actively participate in economic activities, participatory institution building through self-help groups has been found to be an effective tool in developing countries. As of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013, there were more than 59 lakh all-women self-help groups in India and their combined savings stood at more than Rs. 6,515 crore.
16. The micro-finance initiatives based on mutual or self-help method has helped women's empowerment to a considerable extent. By laying focus on group ownership, control and

management, and collective decision making, women become better equipped to participate in local governance structures. India has made some remarkable strides in this direction. We must continue to provide impetus to financial cooperation at the micro level.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

17. The education of women especially plays a vital role in shaping a society. It is said that 'if you educate a man, you educate an individual; if you educate a woman, you educate a generation'. Today in towns and villages, young girls are eager to learn and study. Education of the girl child must find additional emphasis in our programmes.
  
18. We have launched a programme aimed at making a Clean India within the next five years to commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. It was Gandhiji who dreamt of an India where ideal village would be one which has a clean environment. Sanitation must form an integral part of every household as it helps people, especially women, maintain health, privacy and a life of dignity.

19. Swami Vivekananda had said and I quote: “*It is impossible to think about the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is impossible for a bird to fly only on one wing*” (unquote). Women deserve to have power both within and outside their homes.
  
20. The United Nations define women’s empowerment as her sense of self-worth; her right to live and to determine choices; her right to have access to opportunities and resources; her right to have the power to control. To realize these worthy objectives, we need more change icons like Late Justice Bhandare. We need to recognize women’s extraordinary ability to influence the direction of social change to create a just socio-economic order. With these words, I conclude thanking the organisers for giving me the opportunity to share my perceptions with you.

Thank you.

Jai Hind.



