

**SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB
MUKHERJEE AT THE PRESENTATION OF THE STREE
SHAKTI PURASKAR FOR THE YEAR 2012 ON
INTERNATIONAL'S WOMEN'S DAY**

Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi: 08-03-2013

It gives me immense pleasure to join you in the celebration of International Women's Day. I take this opportunity to extend warm greetings to women in all parts of our country. I thank them for their invaluable contribution in the making of our great nation.

I am happy that on this occasion we are recognising the exemplary service of the outstanding women who have been conferred the Stree Shakti Awards today. We are paying tribute not only to them but to all women who have worked and contributed directly or indirectly to social development in our country.

I am particularly happy that the Rani Lakshmi Bai Award has been given to "the spirit of Nirbhaya" and was received by the mother of the brave heart from Delhi.

Nirbhaya as she is now known was a brave and courageous girl who fought till the very last minute for her dignity and her life. She is a true hero and symbolises the best in Indian youth and women. Her sad demise should not be in vain. We must do everything possible to ensure that such an incident never happens again.

I will also like to felicitate and express my deep appreciation to other Awardees of Stree Shakti Puraskar

namely Mrs. Pranita Talukdar of Assam, Ms. Sonika Agarwal of Delhi, Smt. Guramma H Sankina of Karnataka, Mrs. Omana T.K. of Kerala and Smt Olga D'Mello of Maharashtra for their invaluable contributions to the empowerment of women.

On this International Women's Day, let us resolve to redouble efforts for the protection of women and their welfare. We must strive to ensure that women feel safe and secure at all times in our country. We must inculcate in every member of our society the highest of respect for women.

We as a society must work towards changing negative perceptions about women. Women should be provided a safe, secure and congenial environment in which their talents can flower and they can contribute their full share in the building of our nation. Our history, traditions, religions and cultural values as well as the Constitution demand nothing less.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Women comprise 48.5 per cent of our total population and although the overall sex ratio has increased by 7 points during the decade 2001 to 2011, the declining child sex ratio for children of 0-6 years of age, is disturbing. The figure for female literacy is also 16.7 percent below male literacy. Surveys have indicated that female hourly wage rates in agriculture also vary from 50 to 75 per cent of the male wage rates. More disturbing is the increase in the incidence of violence against women.

Although the new millennium has witnessed a significant attitudinal shift in our approach to gender equality and women's emancipation, we still carry forward the

ingrained complexities of patriarchy. India ranks 134 in 2011 among 187 countries in terms of the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI) and Gender Inequality Index (GII). This is indefensible - especially as the Founding Fathers of our Constitution had been unambiguous in their commitment to the equality of women. The principle of gender equality is enshrined in our Preamble, Fundamental Rights and the Directive Principles.

There is no room for complacency. To ensure a safe and secure environment for women in their workplaces, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Bill, 2013 has been passed by Parliament. The Government also intends to constitute a Rs.1000 crore fund called the “Nirbhaya Fund” to support initiatives for the protection of women in all spheres of life.

On the recommendations of the Justice J.S. Verma Committee, the Government has promulgated an ordinance, amending the criminal law to provide for stringent punishment for heinous sexual offences against women. However, legislation will become effective only if they are supported by efficient enforcement mechanisms. Reforms in police and judiciary need to be taken up on a continuing basis and in all earnest, so that women get fair and prompt justice. These measures need to be further backed by efforts aimed at empowerment of women and improvement of their health, education and employment opportunities. Disparities in gender that persist in our society can be demolished only through pro-active intervention in the building of adequate

social and physical infrastructure and improving women's participation in governance at all levels.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to remember, in this context, the words of Gandhiji who said, "*Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest details in the activities of man, and she has equal right to liberty of freedom and liberty with him.*" We, as a nation should be guided by these words. We should consciously invest in the future of the women of India.

Women achievers have continuously left their footprints on the sands of time in our country. From the days of our freedom struggle and especially today, an impressive number of women have inspired many others by their achievements - borne of their courage and determination to succeed. Rural women have scripted their success stories by participating in Panchayat elections, far exceeding their 33% quota. They have taken advantage of micro-finance initiatives - implemented in self-help groups. It is heartening to see that there has been an upward trend in control and management and in the collective decision-making in these Groups. India will also have its first Bank dedicated only to women.

Ladies and Gentlemen, empowerment of women must be regarded as not only an element of our efforts towards gender equality but also a critical step for stimulating their full participation in nation building. Swami Vivekananda was of the view that the best barometer of the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women. He said, and I quote, "*All nations have attained greatness by paying proper respect to women.*"

That country and that nation which do not respect women have never become great, nor will ever be in future”.

I call upon all citizens of India to persevere, in their respective spheres, for the comprehensive implementation, in letter and in spirit, of the constitutional rights guaranteed to every woman in India. I compliment all the award winners for the excellent work done by them and the Ministry of Women and Child Development for organizing this event.

Thank you.

Jai Hind.