

Women's Political Empowerment Day Celebrations

April 23-24, 2003

(Delhi, Bhubaneshwar, Bangalore and Chennai)

A Report

On April 24, 1993, India enacted the Seventy-Third Constitutional Amendment Act. This amendment reserved 33 per cent of local government seats for women. The Institute of Social Sciences (ISS) based in New Delhi with offices in Bhubaneshwar, Bangalore and Chennai, has celebrated April 24 as Women's Political Empowerment Day to evaluate the problems and prospects of the women's role in Panchayati Raj system after a decade of seat reservations for women. The regional centres of ISS in Bhubaneshwar, Bangalore and Chennai also celebrated Women's Political Empowerment Day on the same date. The following report compiles reports from these four events in order to share insights and questions for how this Amendment has changed the face of government in India. SAP Canada attended the New Delhi celebration.

New Delhi

In New Delhi, the Celebrations were held on 23-24 April 2003 in Constitution Club, Rafi Marg.

The Delegates

About three hundred delegates including one hundred and seventy two elected women representatives sponsored by eighteen voluntary agencies and four state governments attended the Celebrations. A total of seventeen states including Delhi were represented with maximum number of delegates coming from Gujarat followed by Uttaranchal and Himachal Pradesh. It is interesting to note that representatives from gram panchayat level came in large numbers. Out of total one hundred and seventy two elected women representatives, ward members, sarpanches and up-sarpanches constituted 73 per cent followed by block panchayats and zilla parishads respectively. Thus it can be inferred that the programme has been catering to the needs of most deprived sections of panchayat representatives namely, ward members, sarpanches and up-sarpanches.

Outstanding Women Panchayat Leader Awards

This year we had received 63 nominations from thirteen states of which eighteen nominations were sponsored by the state governments. Maximum number of nominations had come from Bihar followed by Goa, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Karnataka. Tamil Nadu sent two and Kerala sent one nomination. It is also worth while to note that the nominations from Madhya Pradesh were most comprehensive in providing the supporting evidence. Another interesting point to note was that maximum number of nominations (67 per cent) came from the gram panchayats followed by zilla parishads and panchayat samitis. Twenty-seven sarpanches out of forty-two elected women representatives had filed their nomination forms. In so far as the educational qualifications of the contending candidates are concerned, it is heartening to note that all the candidates are literate. At least thirty per cent of them are graduates and eight per cent of them are postgraduates. Thus it is noticed that these elected women representatives began with adequate educational background. The Outstanding Women Panchayat Leader Awards were given to two sarpanches, one from Madhya Pradesh and other from Rajasthan. Ms. Geeta Rathore, sarpanch, Jamonia Talab, Sehore emerged as a prominent leader who is bold and fearless. Her multi-faceted activities include promotion of education especially among women, creation of awareness about the ill-effects of alcoholism, child marriage and crime against women. The second recipient is Ms. Suraj Kunwar from Netra gram panchayat, Jodhpur, Rajasthan. Ms. Kunwar has been involved in many activities aimed primarily at developing her village socially and economically. Both the awardees were given a citation, a plaque and a cash award of Rs10,000. The awards were given away by the Chief Guest Hon'ble Justice Ms. Sujata Manohar at the inaugural session.

Inaugural Session: April 23, 2003

Dr. George Mathew, Director, ISS, New Delhi informed the audience that the Institute has been organizing the programme on Women's Political Empowerment Day on April 24 since 1994. He also pointed out that women got reservations at the panchayats because they had started a movement for the same for a long time.

Invocation: The programme was set in motion with an inspirational song sung by the delegates from SUTRA, Himachal Pradesh.

Ms. Mrinal Pande, Editor, *Hindustan*, delivered the keynote address on the theme of 'Ten Years of Panchayati Raj: Problems and Prospects'. She emphasized that lack of

confidence in women is because of upbringing of a girl child, which is very different from that of a boy and women need to increase their self-confidence so that they perform better in panchayats. She observed that common property resources (CPR) are getting privatised in the rural areas and thereby poor are deprived of their livelihood. As panchayat leaders they should see to it that the source of livelihood doesn't shrink due to privatisation of CPR, because by nature, women try to share power unlike their male counterparts.

Hon'ble Justice, Ms. Sujata Manohar, Member, National Commission of Human Rights, (NHRC) was the *Chief Guest* for the Celebrations. In her Inaugural address, Ms. Manohar stressed that at the onset of tenth year of reservation of women in panchayats, it becomes imperative to assess the impact of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has had on the lives of women, to measure the efficiency of women as decision makers compared to male leaders and to identify the problems and hindrances that are holding them from delivering better results. This will help in recognizing the loopholes in the system and will assist the government and other concerned departments to address and remove them, Ms. Manohar observed.

Dr. Bidyut Mohanty, the Coordinator of the programme extended vote of thanks to the delegates including the chief guest, Hon'ble Justice Ms. Sujata Manohar and the keynote speaker, Mrinal Pande. She observed that in contrast to the initial apprehensions, around six million elected women representatives have come to active politics directly and indirectly because of seat reservations. These women are not only taking up conventional activities in panchayats like road construction etc., but are also addressing the social issues like child marriage, *mrityubhoj*, crime against women, etc.

Special Session I

Prof. Virginius Xaxa, Delhi University chaired the Special Session-I. Ms. Patricia Pinto, Councillor, Panjim Municipal Corporation, Goa and Ms. Veena Gokhale, India Linkage Programme, SAP, Canada were the speakers in this session. The awardees – Ms. Geeta Rathore and Ms. Suraj Kunwar — also shared their experiences.

Ms. Patricia Pinto spoke on the experiences that she had gathered from participating in the workshop on 'Gender Equality and Local Governance' organized by International Canadian Municipal Development of Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM). She elucidated on how she would try to incorporate the methods of empowerment in Goa. She explained the various campaigns, like 'Is the City Safe for Pedestrians?' and 'Bin Free City in 2003' that have been recently started in Goa.

Ms. Veena Gokhale talked about South Asia Partnership (SAP) Canada and its involvement with the issues of women and local government. She pointed out the role of SAP system, as a network of South Asian partner of NGO's working in this field. She also explained the future activities that SAP Canada is planning to carry out in measuring the impact of reservation of seats for women in 73rd and 74th Amendments in India and other South Asian countries.

The Chairperson, Prof. Xaxa, Delhi University, summed up the discussion by pointing out that the panchayati system in India is unable to produce the desired results because the bureaucracy is controlling all the information and this process will remain incomplete if the government does not pass on the information to the concerned people.

Special Session II

Ms. Sehjo Singh, filmmaker and Mr. L.C.Jain, the noted Gandhian Economist addressed the Special Session II. The theme of this session was '*Swaraaj- The Little Republic*'.

Mr. L.C Jain reiterated the definition and characteristics of the self-sufficient villages advocated by Gandhi. He explained how we had fallen short of fulfilling Gandhi's dream by not constitutionalizing panchayats just after the Independence. He maintained that even now that dream can be fulfilled and emphasized that women will have to play a very crucial role in making the village self dependent.

Ms. Sehjo Singh spoke of her fascination for rural India and how the upheavals in India have influenced her to take up films as the medium to show status of women in Indian villages. She explained the process of conceptualization of the film '*Swaraaj- the Little Republic*' and told that it is based on a real story but the locale has been changed.

Cultural Show

The lecture was followed by the screening of the film '*Swaraaj- The Little Republic*' produced by the Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi and directed by Mr. Anwar Jamal. The film narrates the struggle of four low caste women, one of whom is an elected representative, against caste, class and patriarchy to get drinking water in the desert State of Rajasthan. The screening of this film was sponsored by Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India.

Panel Discussion: April 24, 2003

The theme for the panel discussion on April 24 was '*Ten Years of Panchayati Raj in the context of Globalization*'. The speakers in this session were Ms. Asha Ramesh, Capacity

Building Coordinator, Christian Aid, Prof. M.Asalam, IGNOU, New Delhi and Prof. Amrapali Merchant, S.P University, Gujarat. Prof. Surinder Jetley chaired the discussion.

Dr. Merchant presented the change and positive growth in women since the first election in 1994. She pointed out that in the beginning, women from influential families had participated in the elections. However, in the next elections, alert and educated women on their own rights fought the elections. She also emphasized that earlier elected women were just enthusiastic but they are focused and ready to solve problems, earlier they were silent and lacked vision but now they are critical of the system. She said that women leaders have brought the issues of water, education and health to the forefront and if they continue to be like this, soon they will be able to resolve these problems.

Prof. Alsam observed that in spite of the positive change in women, their status is still low. He pointed out that with globalization the situation has gone worse. He maintained that women do a considerable amount of productive work but it is not recognized by anyone. With globalization, issues that affect women directly like health, education, etc., are taking a back seat and hence women are suffering the most. He however, pointed out that globalization should be encouraged very cautiously.

Ms.Asha Ramesh agreed with Prof. Aslam and added that women are the worst hit by globalization as they were the first to lose their jobs because of mechanization. Privatisation, Ms. Asha observed, has made most of the essential commodities, like medicines, costly and this has again affected women adversely. She also pointed out that schemes of micro- credit designed by the International Organizations like World Bank have made the women indebted and trapped for life.

Open Session

Prof. Gopal Iyer, Chandigarh, chaired this session. Women delegates got an opportunity to come up and express their views in this session. At least one delegate from each state was asked to come up and give the status of women's participation in panchayats in her state and share her experiences and ask or make suggestions on related issues. The delegates came up with various issues ranging from right to information to role of panchayats in poverty alleviation. Prof. M. Aslam and the session chair Dr. Gopal Iyer answered the queries.

Informative Film Show

A documentary film 'Nutrition and Health' was screened and it was followed by a lively discussion on the deficiency of iodine content in food. Dr. Peter from AIIMS answered the queries of the delegates.

Presentation of Reports on Group Discussions

During this session, the chairpersons and rapporteurs presented their reports on group discussions. Five groups had been formed to discuss the various aspects of 'Ten Years of Panchayati Raj.' These are:

- Panchayati Raj and Capacity Building
- Panchayati Raj and Globalization
- Panchayati Raj and Right to Information
- Panchayati Raj and Social Evils
- Panchayati Raj and Infrastructure Development

The chairpersons were: Dr. Amrapali Merchant, S.P University, Dr. Gopal Iyer, Chandigarh, Ms. Chandarani Akhori, EKATRA, Ms. Pamela Singla, Delhi School of Social Work and Ms. Harsima Rao, Saurashtra University. Ms. Sheeliema, Ph.D Scholar, JNU, Ms. Preeti Nayak, Ms. Itishree Mohanty, Ms. Anita Lodhi, all from ISS and Ms. Manju Panwar, CAPART acted as rapporteurs for these discussions.

Dr. Mridula Seth, UNFPA, New Delhi chaired the session. She observed that the elected women representatives lacked adequate information about various schemes and more efforts should be made by the government and NGO's working in that area for effective dissemination of information.

Valedictory Session

The theme of Valedictory Session was *'Ten Years of Panchayati Raj and Social Movement'*. Dr. George Mathew welcomed the speakers and appreciated that women present here for their high spirit and enthusiasm. The session was chaired by Prof. B.S Baviskar, Senior Fellow, ISS. The speakers were Ms. Amarjeet Ahuja, Joint Secretary (PR), Ministry of Rural Development, New Delhi and Ms. Vibha Gupta, the barefoot doctor, Magan Sangrahalaya Samiti, Wardha, Maharashtra.

Ms. Amarjeet Ahuja observed that although there are many loopholes in the process of women's empowerment, one cannot deny the fact that among three million

elected representatives one million are women, which in reality is a commendable achievement. So we shouldn't feel disheartened if there are some difficulties. She also elaborated that the Ministry of Rural Development is trying to incorporate a sustained and scientific method of imparting training to the elected leaders in the villages, as it is very important. She added that the ministry is also discussing the idea of best performing panchayat award in every state at all three levels so that the good work done at the panchayats is adequately encouraged. She also elucidated on the new schemes on water management and watershed development of the Rural Ministry where the government will directly interact with the gram panchayats.

The next speaker, Ms. Vibha Gupta maintained that women have to get over the fear that is in their mind and they cannot afford to be ignorant about the resources of their villages. She observed that women have to realize that everything in the village belongs to them and they can question everyone violating any rule pertaining to the village. She emphasized that women in panchayats can work better if they exclude bad or negative people and form a group of positive people who would work together for the well being of the village. Finally, she observed that a village needs to get self-sufficient so that they are less dependent on the government.

Networking with Non Governmental Organizations

Like the previous years, national and regional non governmental organizations (NGOs) participated and identified delegates for the Celebrations. Representatives from organizations like EKATRA, MARG, All India Women's Conference (AIWC), CAPART, Centre for Socio- Economic and Educated Evaluation Research & Development, Centre For Women's Development Studies (CWDS), Institute of Social Sciences Trust (ISST) People First, Forum of Voters, NIUA, Socio-Eco Reforms Centre, Delhi Mahila Samaj, National Council for Women, Mahila Kalyan Samiti, Vikas Mahila Mandal, Nari Mukti Sansarg, DCRC, United Nations Development Programme, (UNDP), NCAS, Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA), UNFPA, Christian Aid, Hindustani Panchayat Sangathan, Delhi University, Indira Gandhi National Open University, Jawaharlal Nehru University and All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in Delhi participated in the Celebrations. The regional NGOs that participated in the seminar were: Vasavya Society of Rural Development, Andhra Pradesh, Sakti Vardhini, CENCORD, Bihar, Sardar Patel Institute of Public Administration, Gujarat, SUTRA, People's Action for People in Need, Himachal Pradesh, Mewat Development Agency, Haryana, Institute of Social Work

Training and Management, Madhya Pradesh, PRAKRITI and Aalochana, Maharashtra, Voluntary Health Association of Punjab (VHAP), Sohard Centre, Prayas Seva Sansthan, Rajasthan, Lok Chetna Manch, Uttaranchal, Sakhi Kendra and India Development Group, Uttar Pradesh. The above mentioned regional organizations helped us to identify the delegates to participate in this Women' Political Empowerment Day Celebrations. UNFPA supported the programme in preparing the conference kits.

Bhubaneshwar

The regional centre of Institute of Social Sciences, in collaboration with Utkal University and Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India and Action-Aid celebrated the Women's Political Empowerment Day on April 24, 2003. The Celebrations were inaugurated by Dr. Damodar Raut, Hon'ble Panchayati Raj Minister, Government of Orissa and Dr. Pandav Nayak, Vice Chancellor, Utkal University, Mr. Tom Olsen, State Representative, UNICEF, Smt. Sukeshi Oram, Chairperson, TRIFED, New Delhi and Smt. Namita Panda, Chairperson, State Women's Commission, Orissa were the guests of honour in the inaugural session of the day.

Chief Guest, Dr. Damodar Raut in his inaugural speech said that around 35,000 women representatives have been elected to the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRIs) in the last rural poll. In order to strengthen the PRIs, the government has decided to transfer powers on 11 subjects to these institutions, he added. He also pointed out that the government has issued an order debarring the male family members to attend the panchayat meetings along with the elected women representatives. He also highlighted the steps taken by the government to empower women economically. Dr. Pandav Nayak, Vice Chancellor, Utkal University stressed on women, literacy. He said women's empowerment is possible by educating women. Ms. Sukeshi Oram, Chairperson, TRIFED, observed that women, empowerment was possible only through panchayats. Mr. Tom Olsen, State Representative, UNICEF, said that 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in local governance was a remarkable step towards women empowerment. Ms. Namita Panda, Chairperson, State Women's Commission, Orissa expressed her confidence in woman's power and mentioned that women need to be reminded of their inherent potential. Dr. Pramila P Patnaik, ISS, Bhubaneshwar welcomed the delegates. Mr. K.K Patnaik, the Regional coordinator, ISS, Bhubaneshwar chaired the Inaugural session.

The Celebrations was attended by more than 200 participants including elected women representatives from about fifteen districts, academicians, various stakeholders and

government officials. Dr. Supriya Patnaik, State Representative DFID, Orissa, Mr. Soroj Dash, Assistant Director, SIRD and Mr. Swapneshwar Baya, Director, Panchayati Raj, Government of Orissa, participated in the panel discussion. It was an interactive session where elected representatives put up their queries to speakers. Ways of curbing corruption and developing better interface between officials and non-officials were some of the issues that were discussed at great length. *Swaraaj- The Little Republic* was screened in the afternoon session and enjoyed by the participants. However, it was suggested that the film should be dubbed in the local language and shown in remote villages of Orissa. The Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India had sponsored the screening of the film.

Bangalore

The Regional centre of the Institute of Social Sciences, Bangalore celebrated Women's Political Empowerment Day on April 24, 2003. The participants (76) included elected women representatives, officials, researchers, activists, NGOs and social workers. Mr. M. Divakar Babu, the Hon'ble Minister of State Co-operation, Government of Karnataka inaugurated the Celebrations and Ms. Leeladevi R Prasad, President, Karnataka, Lekhaki Parishat, Bangalore, Ms. Ratna. G. Reddy, President, Urban Zilla Panchayat, Bangalore and former MP Shri. C. Narayanaswamy were guests for the occasion. The session was followed by presentations from the states of Lakshwadeep, Goa, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Karnataka. Dr. B.S Bhargava, Senior Fellow, Institute of Social Sciences, chaired the afternoon session, and Dr. Manu Kulkarni and Dr. Usha Rao were the speakers. This session was followed by the screening of film *Swaraaj- The Little Republic*, directed by Anwar Jamal. The Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, sponsored the screening of the film.

Chennai

To mark the Women's Political Empowerment Day, one-day Round Table Conference was organised by the regional centre of Institute of Social Sciences at Chennai. Nine Panchayat Presidents and one Municipal Councillor, Ms. Renuka Lakshmi, Ms. Vimala Subramanium, Head, Railway Women's Employee and Activists of SRMU, Ms. Uma Devi, State President, Women's Wing, Mr. George Gomez, Trade Union leader and eminent environmentalist, Tuticorin, Dr. Vijayaram, Professor, Madras School of Social Work, newspaper reporters, Mr. K. Ramachandran from Hindu and Ms. Mini

Muringatheri from New Indian Express, Ms. Sheelu from Women's Collective, Ms. Kalpana from Tamil Nadu Forum, Ms. Mohanasundari from All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) participated in the discussion. Dr. G. Palanithurai, Professor and Head, Department of Political Science and Development Administration, Gandhigram, Deemed University initiated the discussion. Some of the main points discussed were: eight years of Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu, problems of financial decentralization and panchayats, issues relating to women representation in panchayats, problems faced by dalits in panchayati raj institutions, status of health facilities in rural areas since the 73rd Amendment. Issues like good governance and problems in forging organic links among three tiers of panchayats were also taken up. Vote of thanks was proposed by Ms. E.K Santha, regional coordinator of the ISS, Chennai. The conference was concluded with the screening of the film *Swaraaj- The Little Republic*, directed by Anwar Jamal. The Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, sponsored the screening of this film.

The Tenth Women's Political Empowerment Day Celebrations at the national level in New Delhi concluded with the following recommendations:

- ◆ Training programmes should be conducted within three months after the election. Within a tenure of five years training should be imparted for three days every year.
- ◆ Regional resource centres should be set up uniformly in all the villages/blocks/districts to impart information about provisions of Panchayati Raj Act, schemes of the Government translated in to regional languages. One other method to solve the information crisis is to impart a boy/ girl in village with training in computer who will then be able to give information to the villagers and the representatives by collecting minimal amount of fee of about Rs 5 or Rs 10.00. Besides this, it was also suggested that once in fifteen days, a man/woman could travel to each village from the district HQ to disseminate information. This suggestion was made because in villages electricity is a problem and so it is very difficult to get information through computer. The woman/man, it was suggested, could be the panchayat secretary or the sarpanch of every gram panchayat who could come and collect information for everyone.
- ◆ To solve problems of alcoholism: *dharna* near *thekas*, drunk people should be boycotted from gram sabhas, loans should not be given to people who indulge in alcoholism, habitual drunkards should be given counseling to save half the money

spent on alcohol, alcohol makers should be provided with alternative source of income.

- ◆ Social discriminations against women should be solved by seeking proactive intervention of NGOs and other community based organisations.
- ◆ Female infanticide should be reduced by registration of all ultra-sound machines, awareness generation by rallies, *dharnas*, and active role of panchayats in solving the problem through constant persuasion.
- ◆ Crime against women should be solved by panchayat's proactive role in punishing the culprit and bringing justice to the victim. Panchayats should take the assistance of police, Self Help Groups (SHGs) and NGO's in solving these issues.
- ◆ Translation of the rights of elected women representatives in panchayats should be done in every regional languages.
- ◆ People should be made aware of participation in gram panchayats and gram sabhas through media awareness camps and NGOs.
- ◆ Education should be under the jurisdiction of panchayats so that they can monitor the running of schools and take necessary actions if needed.

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Women's Political Empowerment Day Celebrations

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