

1500 elected Indian women representatives call for increased quotas for women in government

**A report on Women's Political Empowerment Day Celebrations
23-25 April 2004, New Delhi**

The tenth anniversary of the Women's Political Empowerment Day (April 24) was celebrated at the Siri Fort Auditorium, New Delhi. (This date commemorates the passing of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts in 1992-93, which reserved 33 percent seats at the three levels of local government for women.) Organised by the Institute of Social Sciences (ISS), New Delhi, the celebrations spanned three days – 23, 24 and 25 April, 2004 with more than 1,500 elected women panchayat representatives from Kashmir to Kerala and from Assam to Rajasthan participating actively.

Apart from the women panchayat members, academics, researchers, members of Non-Governmental Organisations, mediapersons etc., as well as Senior Government officials participated in the convention. Among the major highlights of the three-day celebrations was a conference on the theme titled "Ten Years of Women's Political Empowerment: The Journey Ahead". Various plenaries, parallel panel discussions and open house sessions on different dimensions of women's political empowerment and its linkages with issues like health, education, law, livelihood and environment, NGO intervention and electoral process were critically analysed by the experts as well as practitioners.

The National award-winning film on the struggles of elected women panchayat members and presidents titled *Swaraaj: The Little Republic* was screened on this occasion. Cultural programmes were also presented by troupes from different states. A play titled *Faisla Thik Hai* staged by the staff members of the Institute was a special attraction. The stalls set up by Self Help Groups (SHGs) working with panchayats demonstrated creative capacity of women in villages when organised.

The Speakers

As many as 44 speakers and panelists participated in the different plenary and working sessions. The inaugural session was addressed by Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, former president of the India International Centre; Ms. Shabana Azmi, former member of the Rajya Sabha; Ms. Indira Jaising, Senior Advocate, Supreme Court of India; Prof. K.C. Malhotra, Chairperson, National Advisory Board, Poorest Area Civil Society Programme (PACS); and Dr, George Mathew, Director, ISS. Ms. Poornima Advani, Chairperson, National Commission for Women and Mr. M.S. Gill, former Chief Election Commissioner of India; addressed the valedictory session. Two senior officials of the government of India, Ms Sudha Pillai, Addl. Secretary, Ministry of Mines and Mr. Jayant Kumar Banthia, Registrar General of India, Ms. Shalini Rajneesh, Private Secretary, Minister of State for Finance, Govt. of India; addressed the gathering. (See box at the end for complete speaker list.)

The Highlights:

This year's Women's Political Empowerment Day Celebrations had many firsts to its credit. For the first time, more than 1,500 young, energetic elected women representing 845 panchayats and municipalities participated in the convention. It was by far the largest gathering of elected women members from panchayats in a convention of such kind. For the first time delegates from Leh, (Jammu and Kashmir), Nagaland, Jharkhand and Malkangiri (Orissa) attended the celebrations.

A large chunk of delegates were in the age group of 30-40. Moreover, the majority of the delegates were gram panchayat representatives. Women belonging to the Scheduled Castes, particularly the most oppressed Mushahar community, primitive tribes, including the Banda and Kandha tribes participated in large numbers.

The convention also drew a large number of Muslim women from the most backward districts. The number of men escorting the women panchayat members was much less than that of the previous years. More than 1,500 delegates waving flags demanding 50 per cent reservation for women in governance and passing a Charter of Demands

presented a unique spectacle. The percentage of illiterate and barely literate women panchayat members among the participants was much less than that of the previous years. Outstanding Women Panchayat Leaders Awards were given to three sarpanches – Ms. Ekta Jaiswal (Madhya Pradesh) a ‘Hi Tech’ sarpanch, Ms. P. Baby Balakrishnan (Kerala) a People’s Campaigner and one who has effectively implemented government schemes – Ms. Nirmala Devi Sahu (Chhattisgarh).

The Issues

The issues raised in the various panel discussions and interactive sessions ranged from the social dimensions of patriarchy to good governance, transparency and accountability in panchayats. The role of the quota system in ensuring a ‘critical mass’ of women in local bodies came in for praise. Many of the participants expressed the opinion that though panchayats have been given the charge of 29 subjects, devolution of financial power is still largely on paper. Other issues which generated heated discussion included gender asymmetry both in terms of access to education and health services. Many resource persons maintained that provision of reservation for women in local bodies should not be seen as a magic wand to achieve empowerment because there are many loopholes in it.

It was also felt that panchayats in general and the women panchayat representatives in particular will have an important role to play in terms of livelihood in the age of globalisation. Essential services like health and education can be more effectively delivered, provided panchayat members become empowered through NGO intervention. Finally, elected women representatives themselves should realise that though they have every right to press for the implementation of the Charter of Demands, they should not lose sight of their own sense of accountability.

The Charter of Demands adopted by the Tenth Women’s Political Empowerment Day Convention.

We, the 1,500 representatives of elected women panchayat leaders from all the States and Union Territories of India, who assembled in Delhi to celebrate the Women's Political Empowerment Day, after due deliberation unanimously resolve the following and appeal

to the authorities concerned to implement the demands:

- 1) Raise reservation for women in panchayats to fifty per cent and provide reservation for women in Parliament and State legislatures.
- 2) Set up Panchayat Training Centers for women at least one in each division in each State, to strengthen the capacity-building of women representatives within a year of their election. Refresher courses be organised at least once every year. Training programmes for women panchayat members should aim at continuous skill up-gradation including internet access to enable them to handle panchayat work with competence and efficiency.
- 3) Introduce regular gender sensitive reorientation programmes for the MPs, MLAs and bureaucrats about the funds, functions and functionaries of the Panchayats.
- 4) Ensure that preference is given by Gram Panchayats to women's self- help groups in awarding contracts for village level construction work.
- 5) Ensure that due consideration is given by authorities at all levels to the proposals of the Gram Sabha, particularly those relating to issues of women and children.
- 6) Facilitate formation of women's associations at different levels to act as pressure groups.
- 7) Provide reservation for women for the post of Up-Pradhan / Up-Sarpanch of the Gram Panchayats.
- 8) Ensure adequate number of women panchayat secretaries and entrust not more than two Gram Panchayats to one Panchayat Secretary/Village Development Officer.
- 9) Ensure that every State Government opens a 'toll-free help line' for panchayat women at the state and district levels to attend to emergent needs (adverse or otherwise) of elected women functionaries of PRIs in terms of police assistance, information dissemination, legal assistance, counselling, etc., with a view to strengthen women's participation in local governance. Set up a national centre in Delhi to co-ordinate all the State-level helplines and act as a resource centre.
- 10) Provide for sub-quorum for women in the Gram Sabha.
- 11) Give representation to women on all committees of the panchayats at all levels and see to it that parallel committees are not formed.
- 12) Implement the Women Component of the Five-Year Plan through panchayats.
- 13) Provide for stringent laws to deal with those committing violence against women candidates during and after elections.

- 14) Scrap the two-child norm as applicable at present in respect of the representatives of panchayats.
- 15) Provide right to land and housing in joint names of spouses and for single, deserted, Dalit, tribal, *Devadasi*, widowed and battered women, and for those rendered homeless in caste/communal riots and due to displacement.
- 16) Strictly implement the law regarding equal wages for women.
- 17) Provide literacy training under special crash programmes for illiterate women Panchayat members.
- 18) Facilitate exchange programmes for panchayat women representatives inside and outside the country.
- 19) Give awards for outstanding performance by women representatives at all levels of the panchayats in the country.
- 20) Ensure that the government provides funds for celebrating women's empowerment day at the national, state and district levels.

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Other resource persons who addressed the convention included Prof. Partha Nath Mukherjee, Senior Fellow, S.K. Dey Chair, ISS; Prof. Drude Dahelrup, Stockholm University, Sweden; Ms. Rita Bahuguna Joshi, President, All India Mahila Congress; Prof. Bina Agarwal, Institute of Economic Growth; Dr. Ganesan Balachander, Representative, Ford Foundation; Dr. Illina Sen, Rupantar, Chhattisgarh; Mr. A.R. Nanda, President, Population Foundation of India; Dr. Chandrakant Pandav, All India Institute of Medical Sciences; Dr. Uma Nambiar, President, National Cancer Care Foundation; Dr. N.H. Antia, Director, Foundation for Research in Community Health, Pune; Dr. Alpana Sagar, Assistant Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU); Prof. Karuna Chanana, JNU; Prof. Poonam Batra, Delhi University; Mr. S.V. Sharan, Senior Fellow, ISS; Ms. Vasudha Dhagamwar, Founder President, MARG; Mr. S.K. Sharma, Trustee, People First; Dr. Kumud Sharma, Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS); Ms. Ginny Srivastava, Director, Astha, Rajasthan; Ms. Amita Punj, Partners in Law and Development (PLD); Ms. Rita Sarin, Country Director, The Hunger Project; Ms. Syeeda Hameed, Founder, Muslim Women's Forum; Ms. Revathi Narayana, National Project Coordinator, Charca; Ms. Mamata Jaitly, Women's Documentation and Resource Centre, Rajasthan; Dr. B.D. Sharma, President, Bharat Jan Andolan; Ms. Gyari Dolma, Vice Chairperson, Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies; Dr. Manu Kulkarni, Senior Fellow, ISS; Prof. Gopal Iyer, Panjab University; Prof. B.S. Baviskar, Senior Fellow, ISS; Mr. D.N. Gupta, Fellow, ISS; Dr. Lopamudra Mohanty, Former Chairperson, State Commission for Women, Orissa. Ms. Sehjo Singh, Social Activist and film maker, anchored the opening interactive session on 23 April. Dr. Bidyut Mohanty, National Coordinator, Women's Political Empowerment Day Celebrations, was overall in-charge.