

ADDRESS BY SMT.D.PURANDESWARI, MINISTER OF STATE FOR HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT, GOVERNMENT OF INDIA AT THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF ALL INDIA MAHILA CONGRESS (I), AICC MEDIA HALL, NEW DELHI ON 7-1-2009.

Madam Prabha Thakur, MP, President of All India Mahila Congress (I), other dignitaries, guests and friends. I deem it an honour to have been called upon to deliver the address to the respected members of All India Mahila Congress (I) for this provides me a good occasion to interact with lady congress workers drawn from various parts of the country and share my perception about the shape of events and opportunities in the forth coming elections in the country scheduled to take place a few months hence.

The culture, history and religion of India give women an exalted position. Their participation in the freedom struggle and present day democratic politics is quite visible and well recognized. The country's Constitution, under the Fundamental Rights, guarantees equality of sexes and confers on women the same rights as those on men. There are portions, wherein it goes even further and provides for special measures to protect women and promote their development. A good deal of social legislation, socio-economic policies and statutory measures have sought to strengthen and implement these objectives. As a result women are increasingly visible today in all spheres life.

Despite this, the participation of common women in politics or of women playing a role in decision making by occupying seats of political power is very meager and peripheral. At the best of times, only 8 per cent of the total membership of the Parliament was female. Such a micro-analysis, however, does not speak of the political awareness of the women of India, of the factors for their low participation, the nature of participation or the sectoral distribution of the women who do participate and chalk out for themselves a political career. The number, extent, nature and levels of women participants in politics and playing politically active roles are far from being satisfactory. While substantial gains have been made by the women's movement over the decades in India, this has not been adequately reflected in the representation of women in position of power.

Consequently, women are poorly represented in Parliament, State Legislature and other decision-making bodies. Out of total of 4,120 MLAs in 28 states and two union territories, there were a total of 280 women – under 7 per cent of all MLAs compared to about 9.5 per cent women MPs in Lok Sabha. Congress and BJP account for about 25 per cent women MLAs each. CPI/CPM account for about 14 per cent while the remaining 36 per cent belong to other parties. This situation prevails all over the globe. In Britain, where women were granted franchise way back in 1918, the first woman member took her seat in 1919. In 1970 elections, only 26 were returned to the House of Commons, which constituted only 4.1 per cent of the total membership. In US, where women got franchise as far back as August, 1920, there were only 10 members, 2.03 per cent only, in House of Representatives,

which was comprised 435 members in the early 1970s. Most countries in the world have failed to give due space and representation to women in their political life. Women are moving in the direction of near equal participation in only a handful of countries, such as Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland. In these societies women have begun to seriously alter the very nature of politics, making enduring, and substantial gains in every field. However, in all other countries, including the supposedly advanced democracies of western Europe and North America, where women exercise certain freedoms and have acquired the wherewithal for economic independence, female presence in legislatures remains small and relatively insignificant.

In India the problem for women is more serious for several reasons:

- i. while in many other countries women are inching forward bit by bit, in India the participation of women in politics has actually declined since the days of freedom movement, both in quantity and quality.
- ii.
- iii. Government and politics are more important factors in the economic, social, and power structures in India than in most other countries with stronger civil societies, and so, the effect of women's marginalisation in politics is even more detrimental here.
- iv. Women are not independent voters;
- v. that a majority are illiterate;
- vi. that a majority make their choice on the basis of suggestions from male members of the family-husbands and sons;
- vii. that women lack information and political awareness; and
- viii. that women were not politically conscious.

A deeper analysis of the socio-economic and cultural factors, more particularly the family position and the power relations within the family, and of factors that prevent the women from gaining access to political information and education etc., are totally lacking. Equally conspicuous by its absence is the analysis of any mobilization and organization of women, their participation in activity/organizations during the inter-election period. In the absence of such a participation and exposure to other than familial sources and activities, women cannot be expected to have developed an independent political consciousness.

Our state is a welfare state. Since the inception of our independence and certainly since the commencement of our Constitution, we have adopted a socialist Democratic Republic which ensures to all the citizens among other things, social, economic and political justice and at the same time assure dignity of the individual. This assertion devolves heavy responsibilities on the State not only to enact suitable legislation for enhancing the welfare of all sections of the citizens but also ensure that aims objectives of these legislations are effectively implemented to yield positive results. It is here that various State Instrumentalities, Government Departments, police and other law-enforcing agencies including Courts-have to put in unstinted efforts to achieve optimal results out of the laws in force. I realize that gigantic size of the country and enormous magnitude of the problems are by themselves heavy deterrents for quick, effective and positive results but they should not be given as excuses for non-performance and slow results. The Government have over the years put in place a number

of legislations for the benefit of womankind, their education, health, job security, congenial atmosphere in workplace, their safety in moving around etc. But unfortunately they have not given us the full benefits. Otherwise how do we explain, continuously declining child ratio, high foeticide and infanticide, high rates of female girl drop outs from the school, continuously rising cases of dowry deaths and cases of rape, sexual harassment and trafficking in women which are constantly showing an upward trend. Against all these crimes and offences, there are laws in place providing deterrent punishment. But our administration it appears is dutifully leaving the victims destitute and desolate. Many cases of domestic violence, eve teasing and rape go unreported because of the slackness of the law enforcing agencies. Our law courts. due to heavy arrears of work, are extremely slow in disposing of gender based offences and the usually there is a yawning time lag between the commitment of the offence and the award of punishment. In this long period, the unfortunate lady victim is socially ostracized while the incidents receive full publicity because of publication in the media and the morbid and sadistic pleasure of the dominant male chauvinists.

Where do we go from here? What is the solution to ensure full gender equity in our political and social system? One instant solution that comes to my mind is the women's empowerment. By ensuring the women's direct access to formal political power and resources to development women's social position will automatically be transformed to a substantial extent. By gaining status and decision making power in the community, their position within the household will also change for the better. Empirical

studies world over reveal that women are less corrupt and more responsible and conscientious in discharging their duties without fear or favour and with justice and equity. In India since the 73rd Constitutional amendment, which made 1/3rd seats reservation mandatory in Panchayat Raj institutions for women, there has been an extensive debate on the implications of this measure for the balance of power in rural politics, particularly the empowerment of women. The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments in 1993 have brought a definite impact on the participation of women, in terms of absolute numbers in Panchayat Raj Institutions and local bodies. In these elections between 1993 and 1997, women have achieved participation even beyond the 33% of the seats in some states. Lack of education in the rural areas, social and family barriers and pre occupation with house hold duties, were cited as deterrents from preventing women from participating in political process. But the mandatory reservation at P.R. levels has given these women an opportunity to come out and handle obligations in their professional as well as family fronts well enough. The women participation at grass root level has thrown up a trained and younger leadership for the political mainstream that was so far restricted to men and a few selective women.

In electoral terms, women came boast of better track record. While 32.43% of women have been elected from recognized parties, since 1984, the success rate of the male counter parts is only 26.50%. This shows that voters do not discriminate against women. Gender biased sidelining is regrettable, because it excludes an entire untapped gene pool. If more women

enter politics, issues like child marriage, dowry and exploitation of women can be tackled. Reservation policies for women in formal political institutions like Panchayati Raj, Legislatures and Parliament must thus be viewed not as a panacea nor a pre requisite, but as important and necessary enabling condition conducive for their empowerment.

In view of the encouraging results that we have obtained since 73rd and 74th, Constitution Amendment Acts, it is thus essential that we pass without delay the Women Reservation Bill introduced recently in Parliament making provision for reservation of one third of the seats in Parliament and State Legislatures which successive governments since the last decade of the last century have been striving to introduce in Parliament and make a law. The efforts of all of us, especially women organizations should be directed to create an informed public opinion so as to strengthen the hand of the government in this regard, so that a political consensus would be evolved in favour of the women's reservation bill.

The other most potent instrument for the empowerment of women is through education – an infallible instrument. True we have made some worthwhile improvement in universalizing the elementary education by launching innovative schemes such as Mid-day meal scheme, Mahila Samakhya and Sarva Siksha Abhiyan, but the drop out rates among girl children is still a matter of concern. We have to attain zero-drop out rate and ensure full participation from both male and female child. But more than that, we must succeed in empowering women in vocational streams for this alone

will ensure their empowerment in the truest sense of the term by ensuring economic independence and encourage them in their fight against gender inequality. More than a century back, the Indian saint-patriot Swami Vivekananda was asked as to what should be done to improve the position of women in our Society; the great Swami quipped: “give them education, and then they will themselves decide what reforms are necessary for them”. Education, in my perception, has no alternative in fostering dignity, self-sufficiency and qualities of leadership, the attributes that form the basics of women empowerment.

Ladies and gentleman before I conclude, I would like to say that the U.N. Declaration of Women’s Rights 1967 postulated the principle of equality of men and women and advocated its universal recognition in law by all countries as an unavoidable necessity. The U.N. was convinced that the full and complete development of a country, the welfare of the world and the cause of universal peace require the maximum participation of women as well as men in all fields. It was considered that countries had to assure equal rights to women as those of men. Any discrimination against equal rights of women would amount to injustice done to half of humanity and would be incompatible with human dignity, welfare of family and society. Prevention of the participation of women on equal terms with men in political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries was thought to be a great obstacle to the full development of the potentialities of women in the service of their countries and of humanity. The universal Declaration of Human Rights therefore asserted the principle of non-discrimination and

proclaimed that all human beings were born free and equal in dignity and rights. Our Government was a party to this Declaration of Women Rights, 1967 and is thus committed to the ideal of eradication of gender discrimination in all its shapes and forms. We have therefore to march in rapid strides towards this universally committed goal.

Ladies before I end, I would like to emphasize that the problem and issues of women empowerment is no doubt a challenging one but there is no cause for disappointment even in the past there had been many outstanding women leaders and workers in the Congress party at all levels during freedom movement than there are at present in all the political parties put together. The representation of the women and the problems relating to thereto is no doubt a challenging one, but we should not lose heart. We have to face the challenge of pervading general discrimination which has resulted in sidelining even the most veteran women politicians. It is difficult for women to establish a foothold without patronage from powerful men in the party – that too through close personal relations, as wives, daughters and sisters. This is indeed a matter for serious concern because the level of political participation among women in any society acts as a reliable barometer of the health of its democracy. We must take inspiration from the fact that during the freedom movement the cause of women empowerment got support from our eminent leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Tagore, Eswar Chand Vidya Sagar all of whom worked relentlessly for the women in this country. We had the privilege of having the leadership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, one of the

most influential and power leader the world has seen. And today we have got the political leadership of Soniaji who is solely responsible for bringing into a common fold likeminded political parties and constitute what is known as UPA Government. The idealism of Mrs.Gandhi teaches us that one could render effective service to the nation and for that it is not necessary to hold any position of importance in the Government. Though singularly credited for the Congress victory in last elections Soniaji declined the offer of the Prime Minister's post because of her inner conscious which told her that she need not join the Government. Her life and teachings are all a matter of pride for our women hood and if we follow our leadership with sincerity of purpose there is no doubt that victory would be ours at the end.

With these words I have great pleasure in addressing from this Forum on a subject pertaining to empowerment of women.

JAI HIND