

**SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE  
AT THE PRESENTATION OF THE STREE SHAKTI PURUSKAR FOR  
THE YEAR 2013 ON INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY**

Rashtrapati Bhavan, New Delhi: 08-03-2014

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

*Greetings*

At the very outset, I would like to extend my warm greetings to all the participants in this year's Stree Shakti Puruskar Ceremony and through you, I would like to convey my felicitations to all the women of India on International Women's Day.

*Tribute to all the women of India*

As we recognise six outstanding women for their excellence and achievements in the field of social development, I would like to pay tribute to all the women of India who have given the nation their invaluable gift of labour and love.

As housewives, mothers, teachers of India's future generations, businesswomen at the grassroots and executives in the top echelons of the corporate world, they have, through their individual efforts, made contributions, big and small to build the India of today. As respected professionals in all walks of life, women have, in no less measure, made their mark in the frontiers

of science, space exploration and research alike. I would like to make a special mention of the women in our agricultural sector - who are the mainstay of India's food security – and also the scores of women workers who toil shoulder to shoulder with men in building, brick by brick, the mighty physical infrastructure of our country.

Distinguished participants, as a people with an ancient history, are we always mindful that in our traditional social systems, women were accorded due equality and respect. More than 3000 years ago, our society had sanctioned women many liberties. The concept of “shakti” or female energy is a manifestation of the reverence with which women were regarded. Co-education existed and girls had equal opportunities to study. India's history is replete with examples of women having exercised the same rights and powers as men – they have been great administrators as queens and empresses, led armies as warriors, inspired social and religious reforms and fought for the independence of India with utmost courage and determination. It is important to remind ourselves of this.

When India gained her independence, our Founding Fathers were firm in their commitment to provide equal rights for the women of free India. When they drafted our Constitution, they duly

introduced this principle in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights and in the Directives Principles. Their aim was to ensure that forever after, India's laws, policy framework and developmental plans and programmes should incorporate specific measures for the advancement of the female population.

As a result, over the decades, Central and State Governments have focused on gender parity in school education and healthcare in both the rural and urban sectors. Female literacy, a key element of empowerment, has seen an increase and was 65.46% in 2011. The National Rural Health Mission, Integrated Child Development Services scheme and water & sanitation policies have helped reduce infant and maternal mortality rates. The National Food Security Act of 2013 also includes an important element of maternity benefit.

It is seen that strengthening local government institutions has brought more than 10 lakhs women into our *panchayats* and urban local bodies and this is a notable step towards the desired political empowerment of women. However, our satisfaction at this progress, though significant, should not divert our attention from the most reprehensible violations of the rights and dignity of women in India by our own people. It is hard to comprehend that anyone who has been brought up with Indian values could engage in the

savagery that comes to light every single day. Despite the numerous legislations enacted and amendments made in the existing laws by the Central and State Governments to safeguard women, there is still much to be done to provide our women and girl children a semblance of the safety and security that a civilized society should guarantee.

I am aware that the Ministry of Women and Child Development have brought in new legislations such as the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012. These initiatives are timely initiatives. Similarly, the “Ahimsa Messenger” programme is aimed at preventing violence against women and children and involves women at the grassroots level, women leaders, community workers and adolescent girls. I would say that all such initiatives, to achieve their aim, should involve both men and women – especially our youth, giving them a specific role and the responsibility to make it a success. Today, more than half our population is of the age group of about 25 years or younger. They are more socially aware and are developing a whole new set of value systems. This is, therefore

a critical target group and we must not lose any time or opportunity to guide them in the right direction.

When I met you a year ago, I had mentioned that new legislations, no matter how well conceived, must be supported by efficient enforcement mechanisms. How are we doing in this regard? Are we, as a society, expeditiously taking up reforms in our police and judicial systems - on a continuous basis? We need to see that crimes against women are seriously investigated and justice is provided in a prompt manner. Are we taking concrete steps to ensure that our women have all the wherewithal they need to seek justice and receive it? Are we proactively bridging the disparities by building the required societal and physical infrastructure?

Needless to say, legislation, alone, cannot emancipate our women. There is a need for a fundamental re-setting of our mental and moral make-up, our civic sense and our social conduct. We must do all that we can to revive our tradition of according due honour and respect to our mothers and sisters; by doing so we will honour ourselves.

The words of Poet Laureate Rabindranath Tagore come to mind – he had said, and I quote, “*Woman is the builder and*

*moulder of a nation's destiny.... she has a heart, far stronger and bolder than of man.... She is the supreme inspiration for man's onward march....".*

As we appreciate these inspiring words, let us apply ourselves, with sincerity, to the goal of bettering the lives and prospects of women and children in India.

I once again congratulate the Ministry of Women and Child Development and offer my felicitations to the distinguished awardees. I am sure that your example and leadership will inspire many.

Thank you.

Jai Hind.