

Policies & Perspectives



VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

Celebrate Women Achievers, but remember the challenges too

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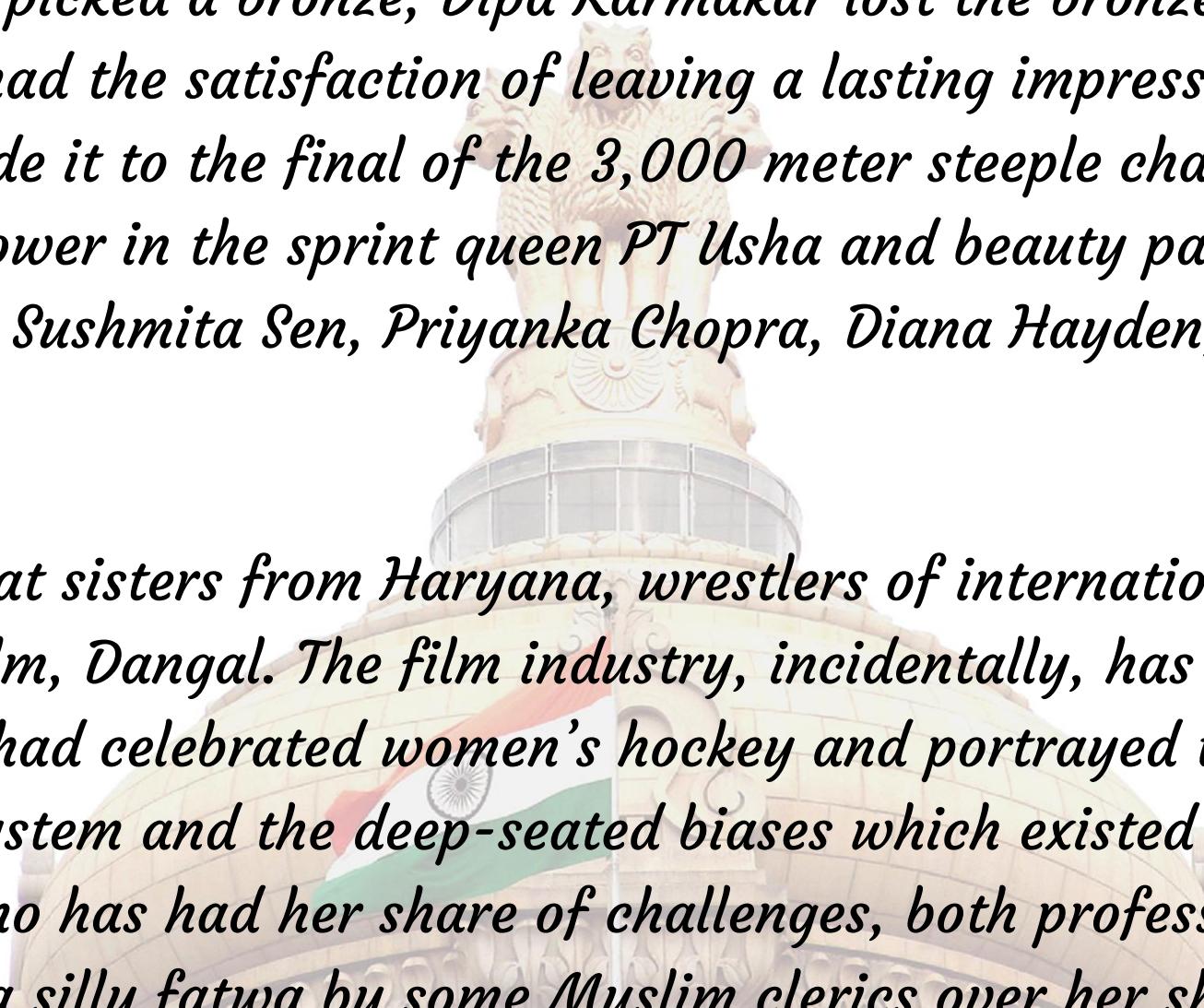
13 Dec 2017

A spate of recent achievements by Indian women in the international arena has predictably led to a celebration of gender empowerment. The women's cricket team reached the final of the World Cup, and although it lost the match the players brought no shame in the defeat. The hockey team won the Asia Cup in grand style. Badminton player PV Sindhu won Super Series tournaments. As many as five Indian women took golds at the Youth World Boxing Championship. Saikhom Mirabai won the silver in weightlifting at the Glasgow Commonwealth Games. Veteran boxer and five-time world champion Mary Kom, on a comeback spree, lifted the Asian boxing championship title in her weight category. And, Manushi Chhillar has been crowned Miss World 2017.

These are the most recent accomplishments by Indian women. Earlier, they did the country proud in the last Olympics. Wrestler Sakshi Malik picked a bronze, Dipa Karmakar lost the bronze narrowly in the gymnastics vault discipline but had the satisfaction of leaving a lasting impression on the international audience, while Lalita Babar made it to the final of the 3,000 meter steeple chase. The earlier decades had seen the rise of Indian women power in the sprint queen PT Usha and beauty pageant winners Aishwarya Rai (now Aishwarya Bachchan), Sushmita Sen, Priyanka Chopra, Diana Hayden, Lara Dutta and a few more.

And, one cannot forget the Phogat sisters from Haryana, wrestlers of international fame, whose exploits inspired the hugely successful film, Dangal. The film industry, incidentally, has done its bit to promote women in sports. Chak De India had celebrated women's hockey and portrayed the grit and determination of the players who braved the system and the deep-seated biases which existed against them. Then there is the tennis player Sania Mirza who has had her share of challenges, both professional and social, and overcame them all — including a silly fatwa by some Muslim clerics over her short dress!

These triumphs have had a salutatory impact. The Chhillar-Chhikar Khap, which comprises Manushi's ancestral village in Haryana, has banned the use of loud DJ music and celebratory gunfire (considered a status symbol in a male-dominated society) during weddings. The success of the likes of Sindhu and Saina Nehwal has led to an explosion of interest among young Indian women to take to the sport. The taboo against women adopting 'male sports' such as boxing and wrestling has all but crumbled. It is true of the North-East where the bias is less pronounced, and is also true of a State such as Haryana where discrimination — which has taken various forms ranging from female infanticide to bias against the girl child — has been most evident. In fact, in what can be considered as a happy paradox, Haryana today tops the list of States in having the most number of internationally renowned women athletes and achievers and has become a source of encouragement for other States to follow in its footsteps with women-centric



policies and their implementation.

Haryana's case needs special mention simply because it was once among the biggest offenders of gender discrimination. For years, the child sex ratio (0-6 years) had been less than 900 girls per 1,000 boys; in some regions of the State it was even worse, at 800 girls or so. But, according to an official bulletin released earlier this year by the 'Beti Padhao-Beti Bachao' campaign team in the State, the child gender ratio had dramatically improved to an average of 950 girls per 1,000 boys — close to parity. Various reasons can be attributed to this turnaround, including Government policies and laws and their effective implementation, as well as the sustained efforts of various non-Government organisations (NGO) which have been toiling for years to help the girl child.

There has been some criticism that the improved figures are partly a result of inflated numbers, but there has been nothing credible to hold that allegation as true. In any case, even if one accounts for an over-zealous bureaucrat's imagination, the overall improvement cannot be denied. Besides, if one goes by the nationwide Census 2011 figures, the betterment is evident. According to the 2011 Census, the sex ratio in the country was 943 females per 1,000 males. It can be safely assumed that, but for Haryana's dubious contribution, the scenario could have been more cheerful. Before the turnaround, Haryana had the worst sex ratio among all States. According to the same Census, the number was 879 females per 1,000 males — Kerala was the highest with 1,084 females per 1,000 males. If we consider the child sex ratio specifically, Haryana fared the worst of the lot again, with a score of 834 girls per 1,000 boys.

There isn't much of a correlation, at least in the causal sense, between the improved figures and the achievements of Indian women on the international stage. Many women achievers have actually gained glory despite and not because of the system. This is especially true of sports. Years ago, tennis ace Sania Mirza had accused the Indian tennis body of male chauvinism in the selection process for Olympics. Cricketer Diana David was quoted in a news report as saying, "Men are definitely treated better than women in cricket. For every Ranji game, we are paid extremely little, perhaps 10 per cent of what the men would be getting. Most of us continue to play only for the love of the game." Also, by no stretch of imagination can one say that female-friendly policies of Haryana contributed to Manushi Chhillar's accomplishment.

The connect between the Government's aspiration and the individual successes exists at another level. With women achievers getting a high-profile projection, the Government's pro-female policies and programmes, whether at the State or the central levels, get boosted. The achievements have also spurred Governments to fine-tune their policies and seek better implementation. The Beti Padhao-Beti Bachao campaign, for instance, strikes a chord when positioned besides the successful women. At the grassroots level, families would realise more emphatically that it makes sense, socially and financially, to give the best to their girl child. Arjuna award winner boxer Kavita Chahal from Haryana made an interesting observation recently

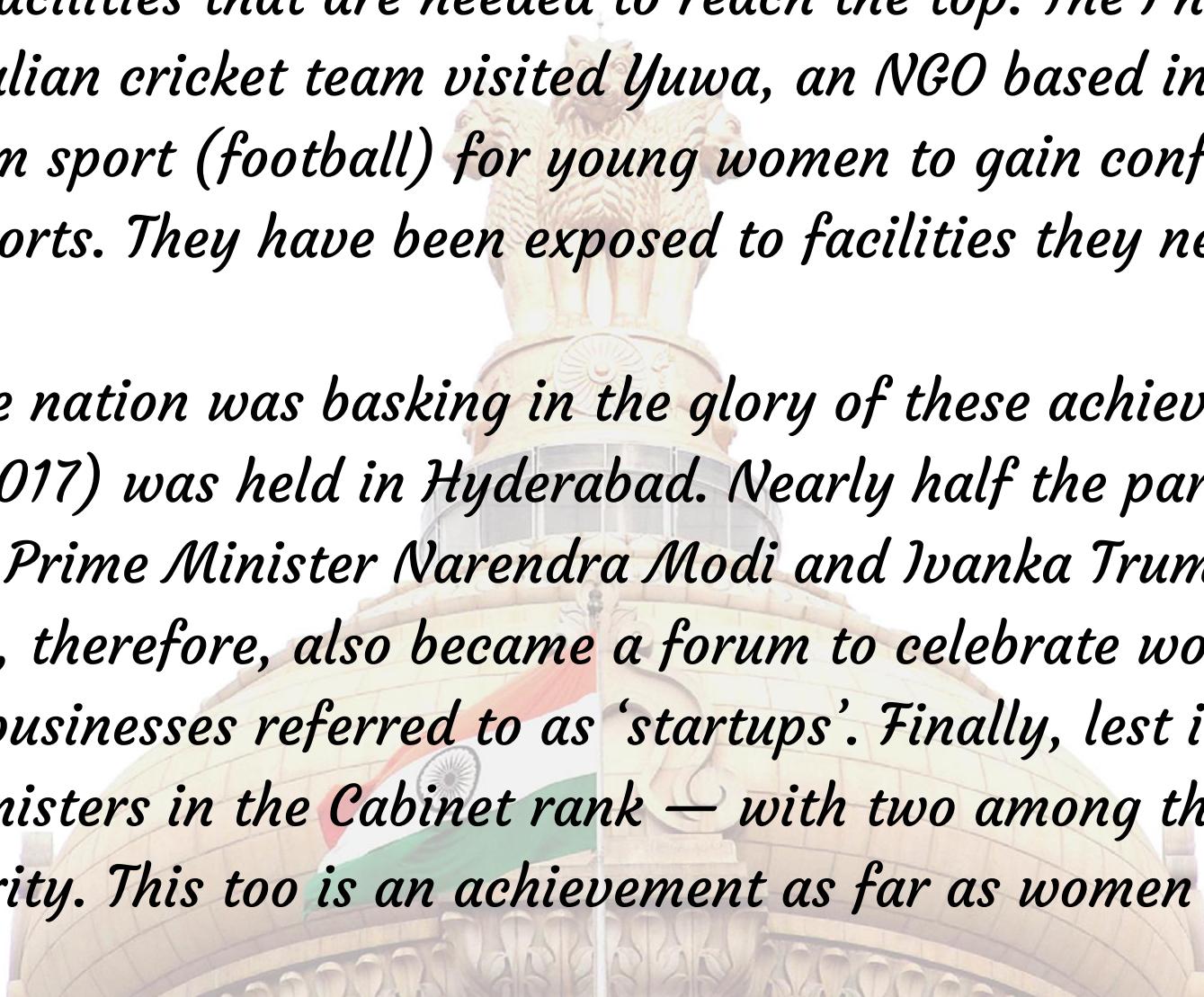


when she said (Times of India, December 3): “When I started in 2005, I was the only girl boxer in Nimri village (Bhiwani). Now there are at least 10.”

Sakshi Chaudhury, who won a gold at the Youth World Boxing Championship, said, “My mother pays more attention to my diet than that of my brother, and he is preparing for the NDA. She says, you need it more.” The social implications and under empowerment too is not lost. Pooja, who got a silver at a boxing event in Serbia recently, stated, “But for boxing, I would have been married off by now. Boxing has given me an opportunity to achieve something, create my own identity.”

These are astounding stories, and there are many more than have been listed here. The commonality is that they celebrate women who have not just made it against formidable odds but have emerged from small towns and villages where not just the social ecosystem was less than encouraging but also where the physical infrastructure to make a mark was lacking. Besides, many of these achievers had lacked access, due to financial constraints, to facilities that are needed to reach the top. The Phogat sisters provide a good example. Months ago, the Australian cricket team visited Yuwa, an NGO based in Ranchi, Jharkhand, which provides a platform through team sport (football) for young women to gain confidence and bring about changes in their lives through sports. They have been exposed to facilities they never had dreamt of.

Quite by coincidence, even as the nation was basking in the glory of these achievements, the Global Entrepreneurship Summit (GES 2017) was held in Hyderabad. Nearly half the participants were women, including those from India. Both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Ivanka Trump, Advisor to the US President, referred to it. The GES, therefore, also became a forum to celebrate women power, this time in business, and especially in new businesses referred to as ‘startups’. Finally, lest it be forgotten, the Modi’s Government has four women Ministers in the Cabinet rank — with two among them being part of the high-level Cabinet Committee on Security. This too is an achievement as far as women power in politics goes.



The glorification of women empowerment, as is evident in the instances cited above and from more that has remained unmentioned, is justifiable. But it would not serve the broader purpose if we get carried away and gloss over the underbelly. There should be no running away from the sad facts. Gender discrimination is still rampant in the country; female infanticide exists in alarming measure; maternal mortality rates are still worrisome; families still lean in favour of sons as against daughters in providing empowerment opportunities; the child-bride phenomenon is not yet a thing of the past; women continue to face bias in their workplace and have additional problems in setting up businesses.

All of these are as true of well-off families and societies as they are of the lesser privileged sections in the country. For instance, while the GES was a big hit, a National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) report released in November said that women entrepreneurs constituted just 11 per cent of Indian startups. Women-focused venture capital firm Saha Fund stated that just three per cent of



women entrepreneurs have received venture capital funding. It is possible that the NITI Aayog's decision to create the Women entrepreneurial and Innovation Cell will help correct the distortion, but we have to wait and see.

According to a study by the Delhi-based Asian Centre for Human Rights titled, "Female Infanticide Worldwide: The Case for action by the UN Rights Council", 117 million girls go demographically "missing" due to sex-selective abortions (something which the United Nations Population Fund too had noted). The problem persists in India despite the Pre-conception and Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act of 1994, which criminalises sex determination of a fetus. There has been a drop in the practice as a result of the law but doctors and clinics continue to indulge in the criminal act. Even the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has admitted that illegal abortions (flouting the law) outnumber the legal ones (which the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act allows). Ensuring that violation of the laws don't happen — through stricter enforcement and punishment — and social mindsets change — through pro-girl child campaigns — is the challenge of the day for both the Government and the NGOs.

According to news reports, the rate of conviction across the country of those accused of violating the Act has been abysmal. In the period 2003-2014, just around 200 doctors were held guilty by the courts. Nearly 15 States did not report even a single conviction. There are differing opinions on ways to tackle the issue. Union Minister Maneka Gandhi had suggested that the gender of the child be compulsorily registered and the birth of every child tracked across the country. But many experts associated with the sector have said the idea is unworkable. When the Government was unable to keep track of the 50,000 odd ultrasound clinics that are used to surreptitiously determine the sex of a foetus, how could it be expected to have a check on the 29 million pregnancies annually in the country? While the last word on the issue is yet to come, authorities and experts need to find broadly acceptable ways to address the grave matter.

The other aspect that is critical to women's empowerment is the maternal mortality rate. The good news is that the maternal mortality rate (MMR) in the country is down; the bad news is that it is still at a worrisome level. According to a recent World Bank data, the MMR has declined in India — from 215 per 100,000 live births in 2010 to 174 in 2015. This is a significant drop and testifies to enhanced material healthcare facilities. But about five women still die every hour in the country from complications during childbirth. India accounts for 17 per cent of such deaths globally. Various schemes have been launched by Governments over the years to check this trend, and they cover aspect such as prompt and adequate medical attention and facilities. The National Rural Health Mission (launched in 2005) and other such schemes have been working hard to tackle the problem.

In 2016, the Union Government kicked off a unique scheme, the Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Maitritva Abhiyan, to provide pregnant women free medical check-ups by private doctors in Government hospitals. In a bid to boost pre-natal care, Prime Minister referred to the "I Pledge for 9" in his monthly Mann Ki Baat



address in June, whereby he asked the private sector to provide free ante-natal care to women, especially in rural, semi-urban and poor regions, on the 9th of every month on a voluntary basis.

We will do well to remember Swami Vivekananda's words: "There is no hope for that family or country where there is no estimation of women, where they live in sadness. For this reason, they have to be raised first."

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(Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the VIF)



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