



Report

## Gender Samvad (22-24 December 2018)

Aman, Shefali Saran and Bharti

*Gender Samvad, a three day event on respect and equality of women in Indian society and their rightful human rights in their personal and professional fronts, the journey of educating the Indian crowd about women equality, awareness towards the social and criminal justice pertaining in the crowd halted to discuss solutions for these issues.*



**Day one** (22<sup>nd</sup> December 2018 ) started with a performance by Bajika Bayar from Taryानी Chhapara, students of Astha Vidya Niketan, Sheohar also presented their understanding about gender equality through dance, drama, singing and poetry.



Renowned Tamil author, columnist, social worker and speaker Rajathi Salma addressed the gathering by telling her story that being born in a small Muslim family she was not allowed to study after the age of thirteen. Her father had four girls from the first marriage and wanted a son, he disliked her as she was the first child from the second marriage. She was restricted to go out until she got married. Even after marriage her situation didn't improve because of conservative in-laws. Although she never stopped educating herself and use to compose poems on scraps of paper and sneaking them out of the house. At the age of 17, her book 'Kala Chuvadu' was published. She further added that even today girls in Tamil Nadu are not allowed to go to school after 12 years. She was the lucky one who could escape the situation but girls in the community continue to face such hurdles, assigning them to do household work and stay at home whereas boys are sent to school



and go out to earn money. With this informative and motivating story, day one ended with a Sufi performance by Rising Malang.

**Day two** started with a speech from Kamala Bhasin. The meaning of 'Gender' was discussed, gender is a socially constructed term which defines the roles of



the biological sexes in the society. She started by reminding us that according to Universal Declaration on Human Rights, Article 1 states that every human by birth is **equal** and **free**. We have gathered to protect our human rights and think what is more important and what our priority is. Stating example from Bihar, she further added that this state has witnessed a

number of struggles for women's rights and the air of change has been started again by Rider Rakesh. We need to take forward this work and understand why a 'man' is talking about 'women and equality' in society. Talking about the constitution, she added that it has been written by 90% of the male population which raises the question whether men can do justice and decide about women's rights in an already patriarchal society! This is also being perceived that women are talking against men but this isn't a fight between men and women, we are fighting against patriarchy. It's a social system and a way of thinking which says that men are superior. It's not just men but even women are patriarchal than men at times, which emanates from the role of men in patriarchy. This is a fight against mentality and not against men. It's about freedom from such a thinking which at any level and time discriminates between the two genders. Even boys have same restrictions as girls which is not being realized, men are often asked or rather been told to act upon the socially defined role of a man in the society which limits their approach to think and act otherwise.

Taking the session further Professor Prithvi Raj Singh from Chhapara talked about gender and its role in language. He stated that according to social construct, language has also been modified. Due to patriarchy everything seems to go for one gender which is male, even neutral words have been modified. There is a need for neutral words to come up. Even the books we read are not gender neutral, discrimination is being reflected on gender. He further added that research on a gender neutral word is going on in elite institutes but we also need to think and bring this on the ground level, as language is not different from our social role. Giving an example he talked about how the elementary books would talk about the subject in gender discriminating terms, i.e., Ram is playing, Sita is cooking.



Professor Medha who teaches Hindi language in Delhi University narrated her



story and struggle by stating a childhood experience. She said that people suggested convent school for her brother whereas government girls school was suggested for her, though eventually she also got admitted in convent school but this whole incident is still fresh in her mind. Another incident which made her realize the inequality she was facing was that she was not allowed to go to Patna to prepare for medical examination and had

to stay in Muzzafarpur. When she was in B.Sc. first year (1998), she organised a session on sex education which was a big thing at that time, however she was supported by her father this time. She was also not permitted to go to JNU (Delhi) for her higher studies stating that the environment is not good but then her mother took a stand for her. To conclude, she stated that even coming from an educated middle class family, she too faced gender discrimination. Taking inspiration from her mother she also motivated all the women present that it is important to dream but it's also important to respect that dream and do your best to achieve that dream. She further motivated the mothers present in the gathering by say emphasizing that if they take a stand for their daughters and their dreams, no matter how much hindrance is being created by society nothing can stop their daughter's dreams to fly high.

She also raised a question that even though we reach to a certain height, are we really free from the male-dominated society? She herself answered innegative. She further explained that faces may have changed, challenges may have changed but there are other new restrictions especially on middle class and upper middle class women. It's the new truth that women are being harassed in their homes in some way or the other but they come out to talk about gender equality and sexual harassment. Times has changed, women have changed, they face new difficulties and new challenges to overcome but we also forget that who is preparing men for these new challenges.



Vinitha Rao a history scholar (Ph.D. on Adivasi women) talked about her ordeals in the society, "Most of the day-time is spent looking out for molesters or people trying to take advantage, or sneakily try to rub against in crowded places." The Ritual "*Jani Shikar*" celebrated in Jharkhand by Adivasi women, to remember an attack on Mumtajarh

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fort during the British Indian rule, wherein women fought by wearing dresses as men. To celebrate that incident a ritual performed every 12 years in Jharkhand for women where they used to dress as men and hunt in the wild. Talking about how in the early 90's the historians never mentioned this significant story which is a 400 years old tradition, revived around 1920's, raising questions like - Did the women had any rights of using weapons in that time? Were they allowed to fight like they fought at Mumtajgarh fort? Were their rights ever given to them? And talking about how the 'give and take' of rights has been a question of **time** rather than a rightful place of theirs.



Dr. Kumarendra from Orai, U.P., works to prevent and educate people against female foeticide and their rights since late 90's. He started with the question - "Will Rakesh cycle all his life?" - explaining how the very basis of someone's identity and self-respect is built at home. Though we may associate females in the house to take

charge of the kitchen but when it comes to changing gas cylinder/connection often say - "*ladki hai, kya gas change karegi. Karegi toh gadbad karegi.*" He pointed out that over the last decade or so, the perceptions and how we associate the female class with certain situations has worsened and improved, both. He said in the country where we have "Happy to bleed" at one place, we also have places like Sheohar where talking about menstruation raised a lot of eyebrows and women were not comfortable with. He insisted local women to educate and understand that their bodies are not someone's property and they should stop thinking and behaving on such lines. Pose good examples, motivate your children, and tell them stories of women from whom they can take inspiration - Rani laxmi Bai, Mother Teresa, Kiren Bedi, Anne Besant, Madam Curie, Kalpana Chawla, Mary Kom, Bachendri Pal, Arunima Sinha, Arati Saha, Justice M. Fathima Beevi, Sania Mirza, Sarla Thakral, Harita Kaur Deol, Priya Jhingan, Mithali Raj - are some of the names who have made their mark in male-dominated classes and even outreach them! The list is continuing and it's our responsibility as citizens, relatives, and parents to empower and educate so they know they are just as equal as everyone else.

He talked about the problems of working in the field for female foeticide - "We have struggled a lot to save 100 of female children but we cannot bring any single person forward, it's a shame on society and parents who support and fuel such thoughts. Laxmi Aggarwal, an acid attack survivor who is now running



campaigns and rehabilitation for girls/women survivors and against the moronic elements of society which promote or resort to such acts. Quoting her, he recited his poem, written for 'Stop Acid Attack' campaign:

## वो दर्द सीने में आज भी है जिन्दा

हाँ, लड़की हूँ मैं तुम्हें इससे क्या,  
हैं मेरे भी कुछ सपने तुम्हें इससे क्या,  
तुम्हारे लिए तो महज एक देह थी,  
शारीरिक सौन्दर्य की मूर्ति भर थी,  
तुम्हारी चाह मैं नहीं मेरा शरीर था,  
वो दर्द सीने में आज भी है जिन्दा.

तुम्हारे इजहार पर मेरा इकरार नहीं,  
इंकार करना कोई बड़ा अपराध नहीं,  
तुम्हारी हाँ से मेरी हाँ मिल न सकी,  
मेरी न की तुमने कीमत न समझी,  
प्यार नहीं तुम्हारा था एक धोखा,  
वो दर्द सीने में आज भी है जिन्दा.

प्यार की आड़ में तेजाब दिया तुमने,  
चेहरा बिगाड़ रूप मिटाया तुमने,  
खुशियों पर जलता अँधेरा फैला गए,  
सपनों को मेरी चीखों में मिटा गए,  
हर चीख पर तुमने अट्टहास किया,  
वो दर्द सीने में आज भी है जिन्दा.

सुनो गौर से न हूँ कमजोर न लाचार,  
थाती मेरा आत्मसम्मान और विश्वास,  
सुन्दरता तन की खो गई हो भले,  
मन ने फिर सपनों के आकाश बुने,  
उस आकाश में अब है उन्मुक्त उड़ना,  
वो दर्द सीने में आज भी है जिन्दा.

विराट अभिमानी वजूद को क्या जानोगे,  
उसकी विशालता को किसी दिन मानोगे,  
अब किसी नकार पर चीख न गूँजेगी,  
कोई और बेटी तेजाब में न झुलसेगी,  
दर्द को पीकर दर्द से सीखा है लड़ना,  
वो दर्द सीने में आज भी है जिन्दा.



Dhirendra Pratap founder of Purvanchal Sena, a youth-oriented group working towards developing Purvanchal and youth empowerment had a different approach to handle tricky situations like bad touch or molestation - *“One punch at the right place, will do the trick”* he said. Working towards women empowerment, his organisation has also taken their self-defence in consideration. It has trained more than thousands of girls in

martial arts and 72 of them are now *‘black belt’* holders. He added - *“Don’t depend on others for your protection and security, you are very well capable of doing it yourself and it gives a stronger statement to someone thinking bad about you.”* Recently he tried and organised a camp for girls in Tariyani-Chapra in Bihar, though a lot of the girls were interested, yet he couldn’t gather enough numbers to conduct the classes due to the mentality and perception of the concerned gender in the region. Adding on to the perceptive gender norms prevailing in the society he raised a question to the women present - *“What are the criteria of differentiating between the genders?”* He said - *“If the nature doesn’t discriminate, why you should accept the social norms”* - if the laws of nature are same for all, then everyone is same. He also urged the women to be politically active in the socio-political structure so that their views are also put forth while framing any type of law. Looking at the present scenario of the Parliament and State Assemblies, only a handful of women are there and 90 percent seats are dominated by male counterparts, implying you leave the responsibility of making laws and schemes for women on men to which they can’t do any justice. He pointed out that how in India traditions are forced on women and these traditions take shape of religion thereby making it harder to argue in the name of “God” and “Religion.” There should be something really basically wrong with the mind-set of certain sections of society where a 10<sup>th</sup> class student (Sanjili) is burned alive in broad daylight and people doing such barbaric crimes continue to live and are widespread. Women-centered violence in India is rampant and mostly go un-reported and undocumented because of certain Indian cultural beliefs and values. Such factors contribute to India's [Gender Inequality Index](#) rating of **0.524** in 2017, putting it in the bottom 20% of ranked countries for that year.



Chandmani, a rural activist in the state of Orissa, talked about her ordeals and her moments of courage during attack on her village by herd of elephants. Child education and norms of education and her efforts for child development and awareness of rights and medical facilities in her area and way she thinks the plans for her area has inspired the local

population.

Sanjeev Chandan, editor of Feminist Hindi magazine "*Streekaal: Stree Ka Samay Aur Sach*" talked about how the developing nation is also very much accepting of girls/women and today more and more inspiring stories of women are coming to fore in India, inspiring the youth of roles of women. Positive mind-sets are also very important and pivotal in all-round societal development. Voting system introduced in India was provided equally to all genders and that was a moment of achievement in itself.

He talked about how the norms of dressing is constantly changing, maybe more in urban centres than rural, but nevertheless it is changing. Though it's a constant battle and with the opposition from backward forces, we are prevailing. The writing-history in India by women started writing on kitchen walls and now they are writing globally, talking about everything. We do not witness direct discriminations nowadays but there was a time when the acts of direct discriminations was in practice, like in medieval Maharashtra. Those days, lower caste people had pots around their necks to spit in and brooms in hands to clear the path on which they walk, so that an upper caste person walking on same path don't walk on so called dirty ground. Similarly in Kerala outcasts and lower caste women were not allowed to wear blouse and were forced to give breast tax, (20<sup>th</sup> century). All these practises were eradicated with continuing revolts and struggles, making us trust that we have the power to change, it may take time but we are walking on right path. In the constitutional assembly at the time of independence one of the 10





women present belonged to one such community of women in Kerala who wore a blouse for the first time.

Sanjili, Nirbhaya, Muzzafarpur Home Shelter crimes are bitter truths of this society but also many instances of women taking over as a President, world class athletes, global writers, artists, women CEOs managing MNCs and million others also exist. We have to tackle with the negative acts, on one hand, we need to promote, boost and take inspirations from the many fighting and winning these battles at home, work and society, on the other hand. The positive stories also need to be told to emphasize that change begins at home.



This three day event ended with a concluding session headed by R.Sreedhar, Geologist from IIT Roorkee now Managing Trustee of Environics Trust, New Delhi. Working for more than 30 years with mountain communities, Rider

Rakesh described him a '*living encyclopaedia of coal and mining sector*' in India. He observed that in Gender Samvad in the last 3 days, everyone including small children to old people participated. In this meeting many people shared their work experiences and their organization's experience with us. This meeting helped people to analyse different situations women encounter and different circumstances they come from. In the last three days, people have also communicated through music, which also helped people to understand how important equality and assimilation is for our lives. Sambhaji Bhagat a Marathi singer through his songs made us think that discrimination is not only for women, but different types of discrimination are being faced by the people. If we believe in equality then there should be no discrimination in our life and society.

If we look at the global data of 2018, we can see that if the world has earned 100 rupees, then 70 rupees of it belongs to the 1% of the population. 68% of our country's capital rests only with 21 families. This is also a kind of discrimination. As in the past, Kamala ji said "Constitution is our religion," according to the Constitution, we are all equal. This discrimination is done by the government under the law and policies. We need to question the policies and their formulation which is somehow leading to the continuing discrimination and if we look at it as a development, our problems have increased even more. Today, if we see who faces more discrimination, then the woman living in the villages, not having the land titles, will be the one under that radar. For example, the highest poverty in the country is seen in Angul district of Orissa, where there are many coal mines. The poorest women belong to this district, whose condition is worse. A 45-day survey conducted with the help of an



institutions in Angul revealed that more than a hundred women are unwed mothers. Such tragedy is going on and we are unable to do anything. Inspiring from these things, Rakesh ji started cycling because such incidents like rape, acid attacks, human trafficking in many areas continue to prevail. To change this process, we have to work at different levels. He said that there is a need to work at three levels (described below) and sought views from the people gathered.

1. I would like to know the idea that how we can continue the process that started from Sheohar.
2. A new kind of rhythm has been arranged with the efforts of Rakesh ji. People come from different places, organizations, background, i.e., teachers, businessman, artists/musicians from different directions having different identities. How the organization/group formed in the Gender Samvad should be in touch with each other and how we all together can take this process forward.
3. What role can we play even if the government forms adequate policies? What are the arrangements on these issues? Like after the Nirbhaya Mishap, the government collected a related tax to benefit survivors and women affected by such incidences. Where did government spend that tax money? Rs 7000 Crores have been deposited in the Nirbhaya fund and no assistance has been received by the victim's family. We have seen some statistics in which the government wants to give 100 crores of Nirbhaya fund to the Railways, where the Indian Railway wants to put an emergency telephone, message services, etc., for any inconvenience in travelling, etc.

People presented their views based on the points raised by him.

1. We need to co-ordinate more with people concerned with with gender programs and such programs need to be taken forward. We should give direction to the effort, it should not end here but be a continuous ongoing process. All the people who have come forward should work together at their level. Government implements many policies, yet people are unable to get benefits from these policies. We should try to reach there and convey it to the people around. We must intensify our efforts to ensure that people reap the benefits of such policies. We must work from the grass roots level.
2. Things emerging from Gender Samvad should also be applied in our country's law. Kamala Bhasin ji said that we have words that classify the gender. There are so many words that have just been made describing men, but there is a dearth of such words when it comes to women. List of such words for women have been made and it was handed over to UN. We should present a proposal in front of the government about how a gender neutral curriculum should be introduced in schools.
3. We talk about working from the grass root level, we should include more and more teachers in the process as they are responsible in preparing the future generation. We somehow forget the role of teachers therefore this should also be our priority.



4. No action plan being formed whenever such meetings are held. We should focus on making an action plan along with identifying the problems. We should also think how we can work more intensely in Bihar.
5. There is no reaction without an initial action. We should start work at grass root level and then make it global. A team should be constituted to work at the international level.
6. The roles of the village Panchayat, Panchayat samiti, city council, the women's reservation of the district council, and the Dalit/Backward Classes in the village was questioned. We should work on women's reservation for the next two years.
7. People of Sheohar should assure that we will not tolerate gender discrimination. For this, the proposal should be given to the district officer. People of the country should join together. A group be formed at the National Level and people should work at their levels.
8. The movement at grass root level which Rakesh ji did looked easy but we can't overlook the hardships behind the process. Economically capable people have to come forward for fund raising and we should have more committed people.
9. What changes have happened on the ground level for women's safety? People of Sheohar should come ahead to organize these programs themselves for gender discrimination.
10. We should bring the Gender Samvad's Dialogue to the Parliament.

With these thoughts and suggestions, it can be said that Gender Samvad marked a beginning of change which needs to be taken forward.