

Let me at the outset express my satisfaction and also acknowledge the endeavour of Mahabharat Group of the Theosophical Order of Service (Odisha Region) for launching this Project on such a vital theme that remains a great necessity as well as a challenge in our society and holds immense importance in the present social context. The effort is crucial and timely. The Project attaches more importance in the wake of rising crime against women and particularly after the recent unfortunate incident in Delhi that not only drew the attention of the whole country but also united everyone in condemning this inhuman act in strong words. It is high time to put an end to all forms of harassment towards our daughters, sisters and mothers and protect their honour and dignity which is seen fast declining in our society.

Today's occasion gives me another opportunity to associate myself with the Mahabharat Group and its activities. I am thankful for the invitation to launch this Project which truly deserves commendation. I understand that this organization was founded by Anne Besant to provide a framework in which people can engage in creative, practical and humanitarian in action in a theosophical spirit. It has a distinguished history of dedicated service to the society in various spheres of life like education, social welfare and justice, health, peace and environment. National and State branches are furthering its cause by taking up several activities and ambitious projects to make life beautiful for all in the universe. The project launched today has with it many hopes, aspirations and expectations to deliver the good. With the commitment of the members of Mahabharat Group which reiterates its firm commitment to the motto of the Theosophical Order of Service that is "A union of those who love in the service of all that suffers" I am confident that it will be able to achieve its ultimate goal for the good of society.

I am a votary of women rights, their empowerment in true sense and I leave no occasion to express my solidarity to any cause relating to protect the honour and dignity of women. But I am deeply saddened by the death of the 23year old paramedical student in Delhi recently in a barbaric incident which is viewed as most disgraceful in a civilized society. The incident was condemned by one and all. This tragedy is an eye opener for us living in the society and before time is running out and further deterioration occurs we have to be alert and act accordingly. Every one of us has a role to play and it is our duty and responsibility to stop violence against women and protect their honour and dignity. We can bring change and that spirit needs to be kindled in every heart.

Ever since India became independent and we adopted a Constitution which has given equal rights to women. In our constant effort to enable women participate in political, economic and administrative activities we have travelled a long way. India is the first country to have taken measures to draw women into leadership positions and thereby into politics by giving them the desired reservation in Panchayati Raj institutions. They have become the symbol of women leadership.

We have several legislations and constitutional provisions ensuring women their rights and appropriate position in society. But we find women continue to be harassed and exploited. For this, we have to go to the root of all these unfortunate incidents that have occurred recently and are still occurring as if nothing has happened and bring a positive change in the attitude and mindset towards women in society. Our effort should be to give strength to women to raise their voice and lead a respectable life in society.

We have many great women both in the past and present who with their sharp knowledge, ability and outlook have scripted their story of success, made the difference and stand out from others. They have dared and achieved, dreamt and accomplished, and earned respect of all and proved that the whole world has to step aside for the person who is willing to make a path and determined to leave a legacy for humankind. Recent decades witnessed Indian women creating history in achieving new heights and excelling in different fronts like law, medicine, education even in armed forces otherwise considered to be of male dominance. They continue to inspire women in every sphere of life.

The state of Odisha boasts of some outstanding women in Ramadevi, Malati Choudhury, Annapurna Maharana, Nandini Satpathy who became the first and only woman Chief Minister of the State, Padmashree Tulasi Munda and Padmashree Dr. Prativa Ray who is recently selected for the prestigious Jnanpith Award to name a few who were not only the symbol of women empowerment but raised the woman spirit in the state. They have shown their capability to be different from the stereotype role and did something remarkable for which the state is proud of.

In the present Gyan Yug or Knowledge Society brainpower has become superior to physical prowess, which has lost its edge and biological difference has no meaning. In terms of brainpower women have shown the world that they are equal and even superior to males. If we look at the Higher Secondary and Secondary Board Examination results, we find girls outnumber boys in the Toppers' list. In universities their number is more than boys. They have proved their superiority. The visible achievements of women in various fields of life have demolished the patriarchal notions of confining women's role to home and hearth. There is a saying – Give them light and they will make their own way. The glowing examples I just mentioned have justified this saying but these achievements have to be multiplied to thousand times to ensure women empowerment a reality.



I am happy that women of Odisha are emerging with confidence in heart and wearing an attitude to excel. They have taken long strides on the path of progress with a changing mindset. But on the other hand I feel sad to find that the women continue to face harassment and face various kinds of violence in this so called civilized society.

In today's world of human rights every one is born free and equal with dignity. I am against any discrimination on the ground of sex. I have all along been emphasizing that our girls and women should be given freedom to choose and right to excel. No one can deny or prevent them from leading a life full of happiness and joy like men rather all our effort should be to help women lead a life of dignity and self-reliance.

We can not leave behind our women as both man and woman are two wheels of our society and both will take it forward. Without one it can not progress. It is said – Behind every successful man there is a woman and behind every successful woman lies hard work. It characterizes the role of women in human life.

Feminist activism is now gaining momentum all over the world and India is no exception. Feminist activists are united over issues such as female infanticide, gender bias, women health and literacy. Alcoholism is often associated with violence against women in India. To eliminate this, many women now have gathered courage, combined in groups and are seen launching anti-liquor campaign and are even successful in their effort. Similarly, formation of self-help groups has not only brought economic independence to women but also developed leadership in them.

Family is no doubt priority for Indian women but they are seen joining workforce on their own terms. Freedom of choice now helps them balance their life. But it is also a reality that a large section of women is in difficult circumstances like in extreme poverty, illiteracy, victims of discrimination, exploitation at workplace and violence. Let us end this culture of violence and for this, we need to create awareness and address the causes of violence rather than its symptoms. Prevention programme and social transformation must go hand in hand. Such transformation involves change in attitude, culture, community life and all these start from the home itself because it is home where all good things are taught.

Empowerment of women is the need of hour. It is a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional concept. Behind empowerment there is aim to protect their rights, enrich their quality of life and involve them in decision making process at all levels. No nation can achieve success until women are empowered which means equipping them to be independent and self-reliant. All emphasis has now been given to empower women in all fronts, politically, socially and also economically.

Education of women is essential in making them empowered. Here, I am reminded of the words of the Swami Vivekananda who said, "Educate your women first and leave to themselves, then they will tell you what reforms are needed." On getting education, they will become torchbearer of change and harbinger of literacy. We have much to cheer about as our girls who are the future human resource are proving superior to boys in terms of brainpower. Their number and performance in academics have been highly praiseworthy but we have to make conscious efforts to see that more number of girls from underprivileged community come to study higher education. For this, we should stop bias towards girl child and encourage girls to study and stand on their own feet.

Today, I have great pleasure to release a book "Living courageously" by Smt. Lipa Rathji who is also a member of Mahabharat Group. I congratulate the author who I am given to understand had been a victim of abuse for writing about the challenges in her life with honesty and courage. I will definitely go through the book and I am sure it will help others to learn how to deal with difficult situations in their own life and find positive solutions to overcome them. Here I would like to tell that self help is the best help and always believe in yourselves and never depend on others. That will make one stronger and bold to meet challenges of life successfully. I also take the opportunity to congratulate the young award winners and whose paintings on the theme "Future Earth" find place in the calendar released on this occasion. The drawings are excellent and I wish them all success.

Let me conclude with a saying, "There will never be a new world order until women are part of it." It is also further said, "If we are looking for change in this world- from a physical and spiritual stand point- it will never happen until we restore honour to women. If we don't do it, we as a species are done for." So let us be true human and respect equality, the nobility inherent in every one of us. With the changing environment I mean a steep decline of moral values and sense of humanity in society and growing intolerance towards women the need for a just and equitable society where women are treated equal with men in practical sense, where they enjoy their rights and feel socially secured is becoming more evident and justified. With these words, I am happy to launch this project that will go a long way in changing the mindset to women and in stopping violence against women. I wish it all success.

*Jai Hind.*