



**SPEECH**  
**OF**  
**HIS EXCELLENCY**  
**LT GENERAL NIRBHAY SHARMA,**  
**PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM (RETD),**  
**GOVERNOR OF**  
**ARUNACHAL PRADESH**  
**DIALOGUE ON**  
**MATRISHAKTI-THE VOICE OF WOMEN POWER**  
**FOR PEACE-BUILDING**  
**ORGANISED BY**  
**GANDHI SMRITI & DARSHAN SAMITI**  
**& KASTURBA GANDHI NATIONAL MEMORIAL TRUST**  
**ASSAM BRANCH**  
**AT**  
**SARANIA ASHRAM, GUWAHATI**  
**6<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2014**

At the very outset, Gandhi Smriti, Darshan Samiti and Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust deserve to be lauded for all the good work carried out by them to bring about attitudinal changes and development through practical applications of Gandhian philosophy and values. Developing capacities of children and the youth and imbibing Gandhian values in them is one of the most important areas. Focusing on empowering the marginalized through vocational training programmes and other livelihood initiatives as part of Gandhian constructive work, **you have also been promoting initiatives to create awareness about life and teachings of Gandhi, through educational media like exhibitions, films, radio documentary and drama ,promoting volunteerism for constructive work etc. Well done and keep it up!**

I felicitate Gandhi Smriti, Darshan Samiti and Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust for organising this three-day dialogue on a very important subject, i.e. **Matrishakti-The Voice of Women Power for Peace Building**. I hope that this meeting of all stakeholders will go a long way in strengthening the Matrishakti and finding ways and means to ensure peace and prosperity in this part of our great Nation.

I compliment each one of you who is participating in this three-day event. Your participation indicates your determination and sense of responsibility towards peaceful coexistence of every living being of the region and most importantly, your commitment towards the future generation. **I am also very enthused to find that young persons, from all the states of the North East including Sikkim, Jammu and Kashmir and other Himalayan regions are here to participate in the event.**

**Now coming to the topic at hand, let me make a few broad observations.**

**First**, in the tribal socio-economic set up, tribal women occupy leading role in the household, their social status is much higher when compared to their counterparts in other parts of the country. They engage themselves in household activities, agricultural field, social and religious functions in addition to their participation in the other activities both economic and non-economic sectors.

**The primary principle reflected in the general belief among various tribes that Mother is the origin of everything.** The myths and beliefs of the tribes are based on female divinities. The feminine principle is so overbearing that sun is considered a female and the moon a male. Women have freedom to choose their spouse. The family of the bride is compensated by bridegroom's family as the former suffers a loss of their daughter due to her marriage. **This, a reversal of dowry, is a testimony of the importance of women.**

Having been associated with this region for many decades, I have closely observed the womenfolk of the region. They are hardworking and independent to a great extent. They are skilled in running the household chores, infants tied to their backs while working in the field, fetching water from a far off water sources, involvement in various activities like sowing seeds, watering, weeding, transplanting, harvesting and storing of the grains and harvest.

**Although society is not matriarchal, the women of the State hold very high and honourable positions. They preside over rituals, which are not seen in other parts of the country.**

**Secondly,** in our country in general and the North east in particular, we are facing challenges of underdevelopment, unemployment, corruption, drug abuse, creeping sense of alienation, ethnic violence, insurgency, terrorism, violence and counter-violence. **Some States of the North East also have a history of conflict for more than five decades, which has also held development to ransom or retarded its momentum.**

In any conflict situation, while the men folk i.e. fathers, brothers, sons and husbands face their share of brunt, women and children are the most vulnerable groups. Worldwide 96% of the detainee populations are men and 90% of the missing are men. However, the impact of conflict has been immense on communities and the families. In such a situation; **many women become the main breadwinner and provider in the family and are first to experience the suffuse sufferings.**

In the words of Dr AnuradhaChenoy, "In 99 per cent of the world's wars, the decision to wage them has been taken by men; women have only supported "men's wars". Women are used by the state and non-state actors in different ways during conflict and in the practice of militarism without being conscious of it".

**Understanding the feminine burden of violence and unrest, the United Nation Security Council has passed a Resolution addressing women's role in conflict and peace processes as well as the impact of war on women.** It recognizes for the first time the role of women in conflict-not as victim, but actors in prevention and resolution of conflicts and in equal participation in peace building and decision making. It has encouraged other international bodies to adopt resolutions and declarations emphasizing the importance of women participation in peace building process.

**Thirdly,** as part of civil society, women's groups of the Northeast have been playing a crucial role in the process of peace building and social movements. Their voice must be heard as important members of the community, state and the nation.

**Women groups in Nagaland, Manipur and Assam have played a vital role as peace activists in the sphere of civic space to resolve conflicts in their society.** The Naga Mother's Association (NMA) took shape as a result of the protracted confrontation between the Naga insurgents and Indian State.

**The Meira Paibis or Torchbearers of Manipur** have also been fighting against alcoholism; drug addiction and HIV infection which have affected their society. Other women organizations are also active in the realm of social reform and pride in fighting against drug addiction, alcoholism, HIV infection.

**Athwaas,** a women's group made up of Kashmiri Muslim, Sikh and Hindu women also took shape to find ways for non-violent, creative and inclusive approaches for conflict transformation in Kashmir.

**In Assam too, women organizations have created their space in peace initiatives;** The Matri Manch took up the issue of abuse & violence against women by the state agents and insurgents and also for the disappeared sons. The Katurba Gandhi Trust has created the Shri Shakti Jagaran Manch to begin dialogue between different communities. Ancholik Mahila Samiti & Sajagota Samiti of Assam, All Chaolik Mahila Samiti, the All Bodo Women's Welfare federation, and the Bodo Women's Justice Forum are working for conflict resolution and rendering humanitarian relief to victims of violence. Other women groups like Naga Women's Union, Manipur Hmar Women Association, Tripura's Borok Women's Forum, Dimasa Women's society, Manipur's Zomi Mother's Association, All Tiwa Women's Association, Rabha Women's Council, the Manipur Women Gun Survivor's Network are also key players in peace building.

Award winning author, Late Mamoni Raisom Goswami mediated for peace between the ULFA and Gol in her individual capacity, as a highly respected member of the Assamese society.

**Fourthly, in these efforts and struggle, two strategies have been adopted. One, which looks at building leadership amongst women** and enabling them to understand the concepts of disarmament and non-military techniques to establish peace, and then focussing on their economic empowerment. **The other strategy is to first economically empower the victimised women by compensating their loss and then creating an enabling environment to nurture their leadership.** Both the models have helped in developing individuals into an organised and empowered group.

**Both strategies emphasise on placing women on the negotiating table and representation of women in the various committees, which can contribute toward governance and peace building.** Some initiatives like ensuring enhanced presence of women in elected bodies, reservation of women in government services, creation of strong women's pressure groups, larger women participation in national forums, employing more women in the para-military forces and designated women guards in relief camps during armed conflicts will go a long way in real empowerment of women and their role in conflict resolution and development of society.

Women's participation in peace efforts is a matter of gender equality and universal human rights and crucial to achieving sustainable peace, economic recovery, social cohesion and political legitimacy. Therefore, **I would earnestly support and encourage all of you, my mothers, sisters and children in your strive towards peace in this region.**

**Fifthly, out of all the North Eastern States, Arunachal Pradesh is perhaps, relatively an "island of peace."** While there is no armed conflict, the issues of social inequality, infirmities in certain tribal customs and the associated ills of under development are a cause of concern. In particular, the cases of drug abuse and other forms of frustration and discontentment amongst the youth is prevalent in many areas. The women can play a significant role in addressing these issues. Women organizations in the state like Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society (APWWS) representing the indigenous women of the State has taken measures for upliftment of women and given special emphasis on eradication of social evils of the society like Child Marriage, Polygamous marriage, payment of bride price, liberation of bonded labour girls like the Puroiks, domestic violence, modification and codification of customary laws, thus playing a major role in women's movement in Arunachal Pradesh. Likewise, members of Amik Matai society in Lohit district, Society for Economic Welfare association are also actively involved in the fight against opium, but much more needs to be done to fight the prevailing social evils.

**In this field, Sarada Mission Girls' Residential School, Khonsa in Tirap district of my State is one such institution worth a special mention.** It is working silently, but most diligently in educating the girls of the area in a meaningful manner. Their special focus is on instilling a sense of self confidence and empowerment. Thousands of girls who have been schooled here are playing a significant role in our society. **We need more such institutions and facilities to carry the noble theme forward.** In this context, I will be happy to facilitate the interaction of Girls' Residential School, Khonsa with your institution to work towards achieving our common goal.

**To sum up, I would say that at the local and community levels, women have been playing roles as problem-solvers, entrepreneurs, and leaders.**

A broader role, women have played to bring peace to their community, state and the region. **They could do something as powerful and game-changing which cannot be done by men folks so efficiently.** Women's involvement in peace negotiations is not just an issue for women, but also for men. The point is to improve life for all people. Moving forward globally in an effective and efficient manner, women have been playing a pivotal role in the security and peace building. I am sure that all of you, who are here today, will immensely contribute in creating a more peaceful region.

Finally, as I conclude, on behalf of people of Arunachal Pradesh on behalf of my wife Smt Jyotsna Sharma and on my own behalf, **I convey our warm greetings and good wishes for this three day dialogue on Matrishakti. It is definitely the accent of women power.**

While expressing heartfelt gratitude to Gandhi Smriti, Darshan Samiti and Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust, Guwahati for giving me an opportunity to participate in it, I look forward to a meaningful follow up of this dialogue to address the challenges of our women, girls and the youth.

Thank you all.

Jai Hind.