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EVENT REPORT



# SASHAKT NARI, VIKSIT BHARAT

Women-Led  
Development @2047

26 February 2026 | Hyatt Regency, New Delhi

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CRF is an emerging independent think tank dedicated to shaping policy through rigorous research and thought leadership. With a strong focus on fostering collaboration between policymakers and industry, CRF integrates practical insights into its research and advocacy efforts. It conducts comprehensive research to support informed decision-making and engages with stakeholders through discussions, events, and publications. CRF's research is focused on three core areas – Climate Change & Energy Transition, Economy & Trade, and Geopolitics & Strategic Studies. The Centre for Climate Change & Energy Transition aims to be a research and expertise hub, focusing on sustainable and clean energy, environmental stewardship, and climate actions.

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CONFERENCE REPORT  
**SASHAKT NARI, VIKSIT BHARAT  
CONFERENCE 2026**  
WOMEN LED DEVELOPMENT@2047

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## FOREWORD



India's journey towards becoming a Viksit Bharat by 2047 cannot be realised unless women are placed at the very centre of the country's economic, social, and institutional transformation. This conviction formed the foundation of the conference "Sashakt Nari, Viksit Bharat: Women-Led Development @ 2047" organised by the Chintan Research Foundation on 26 February 2026. The conference was conceived not merely as another discussion on women's empowerment, but as a serious national conversation on the structural role women must play in shaping India's future.

What emerged over the course of the day was both encouraging and deeply thought-provoking. Policymakers, diplomats, jurists, entrepreneurs, corporate leaders, grassroots changemakers, conservationists, media professionals, sportspersons, and scholars came together to deliberate on one central question: What kind of ecosystem is required for women not merely to participate in India's rise, but to lead it? The discussions revealed that while India has made significant progress in expanding opportunities for women, structural challenges continue to persist. Unpaid care work, unequal access to finance and markets, institutional barriers, social norms, safety concerns, and underrepresentation in leadership spaces continue to constrain women's participation in the public life.

One of the most powerful aspects of the conference was the diversity of voices represented. From rural women entrepreneurs transforming local economies, to women leaders shaping diplomacy, climate action, law, governance, and technology, the conversations highlighted not only the challenges but also the remarkable resilience, innovation, and leadership that women across India demonstrate. The launch of the edited volume *Sashakt Nari, Viksit Bharat: Women-Led Development @ 2047*, co-edited by Dr. Chavi Vasishth and myself, further enriched the conference by bringing together research and policy perspectives on the multidimensional nature of women-led development. The book examines critical themes ranging from economic participation and political representation to legal frameworks and socio-cultural realities. Collectively, the essays argue that empowering women is not simply a moral or social objective, it is indispensable to India's developmental ambitions.

This report captures the richness of those conversations and the spirit of the conference. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all our distinguished speakers, participants, partners, and contributors who made this conference such a substantive and impactful engagement. At CRF, we believe that ideas must ultimately translate into action. It is our hope that the discussions documented in this report will contribute meaningfully to policymaking, institutional reform, and broader public discourse on the future of women-led development in India. As India charts its path towards 2047, the real question is whether our institutions, policies, and mindsets can evolve fast enough to enable women to lead that journey fully and meaningfully.

Warm regards,

**Mr. Shishir Priyadarshi**

President, Chintan Research Foundation



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## INAUGURAL SESSION

On 26 February, Chintan Research Foundation hosted a national-level conference on Sashakt Nari, Viksit Bharat: Women-Led Development @ 2047'. The conference was conceived as a high-level platform to bring forth the significant strides India has taken to strengthen women's empowerment and economic agency through a range of landmark policy initiatives and programmes, aligned with the national vision of women-led development.

The Chief Guest, Smt. Annapurna Devi, Union Minister for Women and Child Development, delivered the Special Address. In her remarks, the Minister underscored the centrality of Naari Shakti in India's development vision. Since 2014, she noted, the Government of India has consistently promoted women-led development as a key pillar of the national goal of Viksit Bharat 2047. Highlighting the impact of major government initiatives, such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana, Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana and Digital India, she stated that these have expanded opportunities for women by improving access to education, finance and digital infrastructure. And schemes such as Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana, Stand-Up India and PM SVANidhi have expanded access to credit and entrepreneurship opportunities for women. Financial inclusion programmes such as Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana have further strengthened women's participation in the formal banking system.

The Minister also highlighted the scale of collective mobilisation through Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Nearly 10 crore women across India are now associated with SHGs, she noted, with more than two crore women having already achieved the status of "Lakhpatti Didis." Therefore, the government in the Union Budget 2026-27 has set an ambitious target under SHE-MART (Self Help Entrepreneur Marts) initiative to empower women entrepreneurs by creating community-owned retail outlets within cluster-level federations of self-help groups. This revolutionary scheme aims to transform the way



women entrepreneurs access markets and sell their products. Taken together, these initiatives reflect a shift from welfare-driven inclusion to capacity-driven participation, where women are increasingly positioned as economic agents rather than beneficiaries.

The Minister too emphasised that empowerment must begin at the grassroots and extend across the life cycle; from education and health to economic opportunity and leadership. Programmes such as Swachh Bharat Mission, Ujjwala Yojana, Jal Jeevan Mission and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana have improved the daily lives and dignity of women across the country.



Dr. Priti Adani, Chairperson of the Adani Foundation, delivered the Keynote address, situating women's empowerment within India's broader developmental trajectory. Reflecting on the nation's aspirations, she posed a fundamental question: "Viksit Bharat for whom, and by whom?" She emphasised that

no nation has achieved sustainable development while leaving half its population on the margins of economic activity.

While India's history offers numerous examples of women's leadership, Dr. Adani stressed that the transformation India seeks must extend far beyond celebrated figures. "The India of tomorrow will be shaped by millions of women in villages, small towns and emerging urban centres—women who may never appear in textbooks but whose economic participation will determine the strength of our nation," she said.

Drawing on the Adani Foundation's grassroots initiatives under its S.H.E. (Supporting Her Exponential Empowerment) framework, Dr. Adani illustrated how access to knowledge, technology and collective organisation can transform livelihoods. In rural communities, women farmers trained to use simple mobile applications for irrigation planning and crop management have been able to improve productivity and income. Similarly, women-led dairy collectives supported through self-help groups have evolved into organised networks that strengthen incomes and bargaining power.

She argued that these experiences of women empowerment are not just about giving power; but about unlocking the power that already exists. Investments in education, skills, digital literacy and market access can create what she described as a "butterfly effect of empowerment," generating intergenerational benefits for families and communities. She also highlighted the importance of enabling policy frameworks and welcomed the growing emphasis on promoting women-led enterprises and expanding women's access to capital and markets.



The inaugural session established a central proposition that India's transition to a developed economy will depend not just on growth, but on who drives it—and women must be at the centre of that shift. Mr. Shishir Priyadarshi, President of CRF, emphasised that the vision of Viksit Bharat must go beyond conventional economic indicators. "Viksit Bharat is not merely about GDP growth, infrastructure or global rankings," he said. "It is about who participates in growth, who benefits from it, and who shapes its direction." He noted that no country can claim genuine progress if half its population remains underrepresented in economic activity and leadership.

Despite rising education levels, women’s participation continues to be constrained by unpaid work, social norms, safety concerns and limited access to finance. He stressed that women-led development must be seen as an economic growth strategy, and called for institutional reforms, greater access to capital, shared care responsibilities and stronger partnerships. Thus, the conference was designed not merely to highlight challenges but to identify pragmatic solutions.

The inaugural session concluded with a shared recognition that India’s aspiration of becoming a developed nation by 2047 cannot be realised without fully harnessing the potential of its women. “There is no limit to what women can accomplish, except the limits that they place upon themselves.” With this powerful reminder, Dr Cchavi Vasisht, Associate Fellow of CRF welcomed everyone and set the tone for a wide-ranging thematic discussions on the central role of women in India’s development journey.

## SASHAKT NARI, VIKSIT BHARAT: WOMEN-LED DEVELOPMENT@2047 - BOOK LAUNCH



As India eyes its 2047 independence centenary, the edited book “Sashakt Nari, Viksit Bharat: Women-Led Development @ 2047,” was launched during the conference. Edited by Shishir Priyadarshi and Dr. Cchavi Vasisht, this book contributes to the conversation of what meaningful, sustainable empowerment of women entails in the Indian context. Shishir Priyadarshi, President of CRF and former World Trade Organisation Director and IAS officer, brings expertise in inclusive trade and governance. Dr. Cchavi Vasisht, Associate Fellow at CRF, specialises in gender-related issues spanning surrogacy, women’s entrepreneurship, and budget analysis.

This book traces the evolution of the bold shift from welfare-focused “women’s development” to “women-led development”, while confronting persistent challenges. It explores how unpaid care work constrains economic inclusion, why educational gains do not consistently translate into workforce

participation, and whether representation in politics and institutions reflect in real decision making. The editors have brought together policy experts and researchers, enriching these analyses with empirical depth. The book is structured around four sections: economic participation, political representation, socio-cultural realities, and legal frameworks.

Section I dissects economic paradoxes as well as achievements: unpaid care work and its impact on their participation, education-workforce gaps, entrepreneurial growth and hurdles, gender-blind trade policies, and asset ownership. Section II traces women's rise from symbolic to substantive power in electoral politics, judiciary, defence, and diplomacy. Section III confronts socio-cultural barriers, spotlighting health, safety, climate agency, and media's dual role in norms. Section IV scrutinises legal tools—from Constitution to Institutional Frameworks for Combating Violence against Women in India. M. Jamshed's conclusion urges multidimensional empowerment, sustained will, and accountability, framing women-led development as a national imperative.

By moving beyond simple welfare models, the book advocates for substantive influence and inclusive governance across all sectors of society. One thread running across all chapters is that achieving a truly developed India requires a fundamental shift where women act as the primary drivers of sustainable and transformative growth. This timely volume offers policymakers a roadmap for Viksit Bharat in which we must ensure that every woman, regardless of identity, has the platform to lead. The vision for a developed India will be defined not only by economic indicators or technological advances, but by the extent to which the nation has realised the promise of equality, justice, leadership and empowerment for all.

The book does not merely document challenges; it reframes women-led development as a multi-sector governance question, cutting across labour markets, political institutions, legal systems, and social norms. At a time when India is redefining its development model, the book serves as a framework for aligning gender inclusion with long-term development strategy and objective of Viksit Bharat @2047.



## PANEL DISCUSSION 1

### ENTERPRISE, EQUITY, EMPOWERMENT: WOMEN DRIVING GROWTH



(From Left – Dr. Abhishek Lakhtakia, Gargi Rawat, Pallavi Joshi Bakhru, Nidarshana Gowani, Shirley Daniel, Sita Pallacholla)

The panel underscored the collective consensus that unlocking the entrepreneurial potential of women is not merely a social imperative, but a foundational pillar for a resilient and developed economy. Moderated by Gargi Rawat, Senior Anchor at NDTV, the session moved beyond conventional discourse to tackle the structural, financial, and societal mechanics required to scale women-led enterprises and a recurring theme throughout the discussion was the urgent need to transition from short-term charitable initiatives to robust, scalable ecosystems.

Sita Pallacholla, CEO of WE Hub, Government of Telangana (India's first state government backed organisation supporting women entrepreneurs), highlighted the effectiveness of institutional frameworks that guide women from idea validation to sustainable income. Striking a chord with the audience, she noted, "Women are often over-mentored and underfunded," emphasising the necessity of practical, hands on financial support and bootcamps. She also shared compelling success stories born from this structured approach, including that of Dr. Hima Bindu, a paralysed doctor who scaled the production of 14 wheelchair variants, and a grassroots millet cookie entrepreneur who transitioned from the informal sector to supplying the Telangana Secretariat and modern supermarkets through formalisation and branding support.

Complementing this state level perspective, Dr. Abhishek Lakhtakia, CEO of the Adani Foundation, detailed the corporate sector's role in driving structural shifts at the grassroots level. He articulated a clear departure from short-term charity towards impactful interventions. "We believe in long term sustainable impacts," Dr. Lakhtakia stated, illustrating how traditional Self-Help Groups (SHGs) can

be transformed into robust, entrepreneurship based organisations. By enabling women to establish their own market presence, through ventures like cloud kitchens, catering, and Swateja Mart, these initiatives have demonstrated remarkable market integration. Highlighting the scale of this success, he noted that these women-led projects are now achieving an impressive ₹86 crore in annual turnover.

Despite these structural wins, significant barriers remain at the policy and perception levels. Dr. Archana Bhatnagar, MD of Haylide Chemicals and President of MAWE, shed light on the pervasive doubts women face regarding their capacities, particularly from financial institutions and government bodies. She advocated strongly for focussed capacity building programmes, especially targeting tier 2 and tier 3 cities. Dr. Bhatnagar pointed out that while government schemes exist, there is a critical need for higher awareness and adequate staffing within agencies to implement them effectively. Her advocacy for equitable public procurement, which contributed to a 5% reservation for women entrepreneurs in government tenders, stood out as a vital policy victory. “Persistence and perseverance are essential for women entrepreneurs,” she reminded the audience, adding that “women have a power that has to be unleashed from them.”

The panel also tackled the harsh realities of breaking into historically male dominated industries. Nidarshana Gowani, MD of the Kamala Group, spoke candidly about the unique hurdles in the real estate sector. She noted that bias and scepticism are daily realities at construction sites and negotiation tables. “Real estate is a unique sector for women; it’s not an easy task,” she acknowledged. Yet, she emphasised that “every woman has a story to tell about her success,” built through resilience and the critical backing of holistic support systems where male domination turns into “male allies” and support, working alongside women-to-women networks.

Looking towards the future economy, Shirley Daniel, Founder and CEO of Atna.AI, brought a crucial perspective on systemic change in the technology sector. Having left a corporate career to establish an AI fraud detection company, Daniel argued that policy alone is insufficient if women are excluded from foundational developmental stages. “The challenge begins at the design stage. Are women having a say in architecting the systems?” she provoked. Daniel stressed that while incremental change is visible, true economic parity requires “women to move beyond being just founders to becoming the architects, funders, and policy influencers of the future.”

Tying these diverse developmental threads together, Pallavi Joshi Bakhru, Senior Partner and Leader of the Family Office at GT, synthesised the core human element required for this economic transformation; unyielding determination and community infrastructure. “Be determined about what you want to do,” she advised, cementing the sentiment with a powerful reminder that “behind a successful woman, there is a whole army of support.” Ultimately, the panel mapped a comprehensive blueprint for the future of women-led entrepreneurship.

The discussion collectively reframed women’s entrepreneurship not as a micro-level livelihood issue, but as a scalable growth engine capable of expanding India’s productive capacity, deepening markets, and formalising economic participation. From the targeted deployment of capital and state backed incubation, to policy reform and systemic inclusion in emerging sectors, the discussion made one thing clear - a truly Viksit Bharat requires dismantling structural barriers and replacing them with sustainable, well-funded ecosystems that treat women as key drivers of market growth.

## FIRE SIDE CHAT 1

### NURTURING THE ECONOMY: UNPAID CARE WORK AT HOMES



(From Left – Amb. Veena Sikri, Dr. Shamika Ravi, Dr. Chhavi Vasisht)

Unpaid care work, often called the “purple economy,” quietly powers India’s households, families, enabling labour market participation of others, supporting public services and even national growth, yet it remains largely invisible in the economic calculations. This hidden labour in the form of cooking, cleaning, childcare, and eldercare, falls overwhelmingly on women’s shoulders, which ultimately restricts female labour force participation, mobility, and entrepreneurial capacity. This compelling fireside chat titled Nurturing the Care Economy – Recognising Unpaid Care Work, brought this issue to life.

The “Give to Gain” theme for International Women’s Day 2026 too recognises women’s unpaid work at home and offers practical ways to ease women’s overwhelming burdens. By giving respect, visibility, knowledge, funding and resources, equal pay and budget along with opportunities and voice, at the home, work and community, the goal is to reduce this “time poverty.”

Women across the globe toil longer hours than men once unpaid domestic and care work enters the picture as the World Inequality Report 2026 starkly reveals. And in India, this injustice cuts even deeper. Dr. Chhavi Vasisht, Associate Fellow at CRF, opened the session by stating the striking data from India’s Time Use Survey, that women spend 305 minutes daily on unpaid care activities, compared to men’s 88 minutes, shouldering nearly 84 percent of the total load. This work generates value equivalent to 15-17 percent of GDP, and must be viewed not merely as a private household responsibility but as a critical macroeconomic challenge which demands urgent policy attention to unleash women’s economic contributions. With value generation of almost 20 percent of the GDP,

if formally accounted for, unpaid care work would represent one of the largest sectors of the Indian economy—yet it remains entirely unrecognised in policy design.

Dr. Shamika Ravi, member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, emphasised that unpaid care work should not be treated as a women's issue alone but as a central economic concern. She highlighted structural peculiarities of India's labour market, particularly the relatively low labour force participation rate (LFPR) compared with other major economies. While China and Vietnam have LFPRs of around 70–75 percent, India's LFPR remained close to 50 percent a decade ago and has only recently increased to around 55–56 percent. A significant share of the working-age population, approximately 45 percent, is neither employed nor actively seeking employment, with women constituting a large proportion of this group.

Despite improvements in women's education and skills, labour market participation remains “sticky,” particularly in urban areas, with working-age women spending nearly four to five hours daily on caregiving responsibilities, including childcare and elder care. This is expected to increase with 120 million elderly citizens and fading joint families. As a result, working women have the least amount of leisure time among all demographic groups in India. This lack of personal time contributes to stress and reduced well-being. Additionally, the housewives have consistently recorded the highest suicide mortality rates in India for several decades, reflecting the psychological burden associated with unpaid work and social expectations. While technological and infrastructural improvements such as piped water, household appliances, and modern amenities can help reduce time burdens; these changes alone are insufficient without broader cultural transformation.

In continuation to this, Ambassador Veena Sikri deepened the narrative with the social and cultural dimensions of unpaid work, breaking down unpaid labour into two major components, i.e. care responsibilities for children, the elderly, and the sick and the household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and maintenance. Even after entering the labour market, women face the double burden as they remain responsible for household duties. This persistent imbalance restricts women's economic participation and reinforces gender inequality. South Asia exhibits some of the highest levels of gender imbalance in unpaid work globally, with limited progress in redistributing household responsibilities. She also noted that rural women's agricultural work remains undercounted, despite women performing the majority of agricultural tasks.

The conversation suggested actions along three dimensions, i.e. Recognition, Reduction and Redistribution of care and household responsibilities. To start with, there is a need for gender-disaggregated data and gender audits to complement gender budgeting efforts. Next, the policy responses should focus on expanding genuine choices for women, rather than simply raising labour force participation mechanically. Women should have the freedom either to participate in the labour market or to devote time to caregiving without economic or social penalties. In addition, there is a need for the development of care infrastructure through markets and public services via providing affordable childcare and eldercare services to ensure women's participation in the labour force.

Furthermore, the central solution to recognise and redistribute is to change social norms and patriarchal mindsets. Despite strong laws and policy programmes, there has been limited progress in addressing underlying attitudes toward gender roles. Mindset formation begins early and therefore, schools and

families play a critical role in shaping attitudes toward gender equality. The textbooks must challenge stereotypes and engage boys for achieving meaningful change.

The session concluded that these conversations are crucial to celebrate women's untapped potential as India advances towards Viksit Bharat at 2047. As when society recognises and invests time and infrastructure which eases burdens through advocacy and support, women gain freedom, and entire communities rise together.

## PANEL DISCUSSION 2

### BREAKING LINES OF CONTROL AND PATRIARCHY: LAW, SECURITY AND DEFENCE



(From Left - Devna Arora, Justice Hima Kohli, Shishir Priyadarshi, Dipti Mohil Chawla, Gathi Prakash)

The persistence of gender hierarchies across institutions of power continues to shape women's participation in law, governance, and national security. While constitutional guarantees of equality have expanded opportunities for women in public life, structural barriers and deeply embedded social attitudes often limit their advancement to positions of leadership. These tensions formed the focus of the panel discussion titled "Breaking Lines of Control and Patriarchy: Law, Security and Representation". Moderated by Devna Arora, Deputy Head (South Asia) at the Singapore International Arbitration Centre (SIAC), the session brought together distinguished voices from the judiciary, defence governance, and the legal profession.

Opening the discussion, Justice Hima Kohli of the Supreme Court of India, offered a compelling reinterpretation of the phrase "lines of control." While the term typically evokes images of contested borders and geopolitical tension, she suggested that women encounter their own invisible lines of

control in everyday life. These boundaries are not enforced by military posts or physical barriers but by inherited customs, social expectations, and deeply entrenched beliefs about gender roles.

Reflecting on the role of the judiciary, she observed that the law itself has historically been shaped within male-dominated public spaces. Women entered the legal framework initially as subjects rather than authors of legal norms. Over time, however, the judiciary has played a crucial role in recalibrating the law in accordance with constitutional morality. She cited several landmark judgments that illustrate this evolution. In *Vishakha v. State of Rajasthan*, the Supreme Court established safeguards against workplace sexual harassment in the absence of legislative provisions. In *Joseph Shine v. Union of India*, the Court struck down the colonial-era adultery law, recognising its deeply patriarchal foundations. The decision in *Vinita Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma* affirmed daughters as coparceners by birth in Hindu joint family property, while *XYZ v. State of Madhya Pradesh* rejected bail conditions that trivialised the gravity of sexual offences. Such decisions, she noted, demonstrate how law can become a site of resistance against entrenched social inequities.

She acknowledged the slow pace of change. In seventy-five years, only eleven women have served as judges of the Supreme Court, and the office of the Chief Justice of India has yet to be held by a woman. Although representation in the district judiciary has improved to nearly 38 percent, the numbers decline sharply at higher levels of the judicial hierarchy. Despite these challenges, she concluded on an optimistic note, observing that each generation has succeeded in pushing the line forward a little further than the previous one. Breaking invisible barriers, she noted, is not an act of confrontation but an affirmation of the Constitution's promise of equality.

Offering a perspective from the defence establishment, Deepti Mohal Chawla, Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Defence, framed women's empowerment as integral to national development and security. She argued that no country can aspire to sustained economic growth or strategic strength while limiting the potential of half its population. Using a SWOT framework, Chawla identified the strengths supporting women's empowerment in India as the constitutional framework, committed political leadership, and an increasingly aware citizenry. At the same time, she acknowledged that persistent weaknesses lie in entrenched social mindsets that historically confined women to caregiving roles and restricted their participation in public and economic spaces.

Yet within these constraints, she identified significant opportunities. Sectors that were once inaccessible to women—particularly the armed forces—are now witnessing meaningful change. Women officers today hold permanent commissions across services, command naval vessels, fly fighter aircraft, and serve in challenging operational environments. These developments, she suggested, reflect a broader institutional shift, though the full impact will depend on whether such opportunities translate into sustained leadership roles. Chawla also highlighted the continuing importance of safety and institutional support for women. Ensuring physical security and equitable working environments is not merely a social concern but a national imperative tied directly to governance and development.

Approaching the issue from the perspective of legal practice, Gathi Prakash, Partner at Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas, highlighted the paradox between scientific equality, constitutional guarantees, and lived experience. From a biological standpoint, she noted, human beings share 46 chromosomes, with only one pair determining sex. Yet society frequently evaluates intelligence, competence, and leadership

through the lens of that single biological difference. Despite constitutional assurances of equality, representation within the legal profession reveals stark disparities.

In seventy-five years, women account for just over four percent of designated senior advocates, and positions such as Solicitor General or Attorney General have never been held by women. Bar Council representation similarly remains limited. She contrasted these trends with the relatively stronger representation within law firms, where institutional structures—such as workplace safety mechanisms and flexible work arrangements—have supported women’s professional advancement. These differences, she suggested, highlight the importance of structural reforms that enable retention and leadership progression.

As moderator, Devna Arora offered reflections from the field of international arbitration, observing that the profession has historically been shaped by its own invisible lines of control. Arbitrator appointments have often emerged from tightly knit professional networks, producing limited diversity in decision-making spaces. However, she noted that these patterns are gradually changing. Women now account for approximately one-third of arbitrator appointments at SIAC—a development that signals meaningful progress compared to earlier decades. She added that as arbitration becomes more institutionalised in South Asia, reliance on informal networks will diminish, creating opportunities for a more inclusive professional ecosystem.

The panel concluded with a shared message: breaking lines of control is not about disruption but about expanding opportunity, strengthening institutions, and ensuring that constitutional commitments to equality are fully realised in everyday practice.

## PANEL DISCUSSION 3

### DAUGHTERS OF THE SOIL: VOICES FROM RURAL INDIA



(From Left - Omkar Dhanke, Subodh Singh, Dakshaben Keshavbhai Chaudhary, Suman Vijay Parab, Jyoti Pradip Deshmukh, Sonalben Naran Goyal, Kailashben Rajubhai Patel, Pushpalata Krushna Gautam, Anita Maran, Suraja TK, Shishir Priyadarshi)

One of the most compelling conversations unfolded in the panel titled “Daughters of the Soil: Voices from Rural India.” The session brought together grassroots women leaders and entrepreneurs from across India who shared their journeys of transformation from limited economic opportunities to becoming drivers of livelihood generation in their communities. The discussion highlighted how targeted training, financial linkages, and community engagement by both public institutions and private philanthropic organisations can help rural women overcome entrenched social barriers and build sustainable local economies. Rural women’s economic empowerment is not merely about income generation but also about dignity, agency, and leadership within communities. The stories shared during the session illustrated this case very beautifully.

One such story was that of Sonalben Naran Goyal, Founder of Sri Gopal Gir Gaushala, whose entrepreneurial journey began with a single cow received at the time of her marriage to establish a farm with 50 Gir cows. However, she soon realised that milk sales alone were insufficient to sustain the business and later expanded to value-added dairy products such as ghee and buttermilk, significantly enhancing their earnings. Today, Sonalben leads a team of ten women who contribute financially to their families’ livelihoods. Her journey demonstrates how diversification and skill development can transform subsistence activities into sustainable enterprises.

Another example of grassroots leadership came from Pushpalata Krushna Gautam, the Sarpanch of Alezari village in Gondia district, Maharashtra. Starting as a village volunteer working on nutrition awareness programmes, she travelled across villages, raising awareness of sustainable farming practices and public health challenges, particularly anaemia among pregnant women. Her commitment to improving community health and agriculture practices earned her the trust of villagers, eventually leading to her election as sarpanch. She has since worked extensively on social welfare schemes for widows and persons with disabilities, strengthening community-level governance and demonstrating the transformative potential of women’s leadership in rural administration.

The panel further highlighted the role of collective women-led enterprises, particularly Self Help Groups (SHGs), in creating new livelihood opportunities. Kailashben Rajubhai Patel, a rural entrepreneur from Hajera village in Surat district, described how her journey began through a Sakhi Mandal initiative focused on natural farming and kitchen gardening. With training and inputs such as kitchen gardening kits, women in her community began cultivating organic vegetables using compost rather than chemical fertilisers. The initiative gradually evolved into a commercial venture once they were connected to markets in Surat. Today, the women sell organic produce in city markets, earning an average monthly income of ₹30,000–₹35,000. The initiative has also drawn attention from policymakers, with the Governor visiting the market to observe the produce grown by these women.

Dakshaben Keshavbhai Chaudhary, representing tribal and marginalised communities, described how professional guidance and financial support helped tribal women overcome deeply rooted social barriers. Today, she leads a network employing more than 500 tribal women engaged in activities ranging from dairy enterprises to services such as mandap decoration, earning up to ₹30,000 per month. Access to credit through bank linkages has been a critical enabler of this growth.

The discussion also underscored the importance of market linkages and digital platforms in scaling rural enterprises. Suman Vijay Parab, who runs a spices and flour business in Mumbai, explained how

her venture started with just a few products but expanded significantly after she received training in digital marketing, social media, and e-commerce. Today, her business offers more than 100 products and sells through retail chains such as DMart as well as online platforms including Amazon and Flipkart. One of her proudest milestones was being invited to set up a stall at Mumbai Airport, reflecting how rural enterprises can scale through digital and market integration. Similarly, Jyoti Pradip Deshmukh, representing the Samrudhi Foundation, highlighted the impact of collective enterprise networks involving more than 4,500 women entrepreneurs engaged in small-scale businesses. With training in packaging, labelling, and financial literacy, these women now operate their own marketplace, Swateja Mart, where products are sold both offline and online.

Suraja TK from Kerala described how women supported by livelihood federations and CSR programmes are engaged in diverse activities ranging from agriculture and catering to boutique services and high-tech cleaning, increasing women's monthly incomes to between ₹8,000 and ₹23,500 and enhancing their social standing within their communities. The session concluded with the inspiring story of Anita Maran from rural Rajasthan. Beginning with a small group of ten women, she built a dairy network that now collects over 10,000 litres of milk daily from 60 villages. Today, the initiative supports nearly 1,200 women, providing them with stable livelihoods beyond the uncertainties of seasonal agriculture.

Collectively, the stories shared in the session underscored a powerful message: when rural women gain access to skills, credit, markets, and institutional support, they not only transform their own lives but also become drivers of inclusive rural development. The panel served as a testament to the resilience, leadership, and entrepreneurial spirit of India's rural women, true "Daughters of the Soil", shaping the future of their communities.

## FIRE SIDE CHAT 2 LISTEN TO HER



(From Left – Nandita Das, Shishir Priyadarshi)

Actor and filmmaker Nandita Das reflected on the intersections of cinema, gender, and social change, urging audiences to pay closer attention to women's voices and experiences both on and off the screen. A multidisciplinary artist with a career spanning more than four decades, Das has appeared in over forty films across ten languages and directed acclaimed works such as *Firaaq*, *Manto*, and *Zwigato*. Her work has consistently explored questions of dignity, identity and social complexity, often centring stories that mainstream cinema tends to overlook.

In a conversation with Shishir Priyadarshi, Das described the phrase not merely as a session title but as a broader call to examine whose voices are amplified in public discourse and whose remain unheard. Speaking candidly about the film industry, she noted that it has historically been male-centric. "When you go to a producer with a project," she said, "the first question is often: who is the hero?" Stories rooted in women's experiences, she explained, are still often perceived as niche rather than mainstream, which creates economic hurdles for filmmakers seeking to tell such narratives.

Das recalled that when she directed her first film, *Firaaq*, she was frequently asked about her experience as a "woman director." Initially reluctant to accept the label, she insisted on simply being called a director. Over time, however, she recognised that highlighting gender disparities in filmmaking was necessary to draw attention to the limited representation of women behind the camera.

The conversation also explored the evolving media landscape. While the emergence of multiplexes and streaming platforms once seemed to promise greater space for diverse storytelling, Das observed that commercial pressures remain strong. Digital platforms increasingly prioritise instant audience engagement within the first few minutes, she noted, leaving little room for slower narratives that unpack complex social realities. Her project "Listen to Her" examines the domestic sphere during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing the irony behind the universal call to "Stay Home, Stay Safe." For many women, she explained, the home became a site of heightened vulnerability rather than protection.

Das reflected on the subtle ways women often express frustration and anger. Social conditioning, she said, discourages blunt confrontation, leading many women to communicate dissent through sarcasm or quiet resistance. She described conditioning itself as a deeply embedded structural force that shapes behaviour and expectations. Reflecting on her own upbringing, she shared that her parents practised a rare role reversal in household responsibilities and childcare. That environment, she said, enabled both her and her younger brother to pursue their aspirations with equal encouragement. Such nuanced stories, however, can be difficult to explain within the commercial logic of the film industry.

As a result, many of her projects rely on diversified funding models involving individual supporters, philanthropic grants and independent investors. "Art," she remarked, "is more like alchemy than science," underscoring the inherent unpredictability of filmmaking. She also stressed the importance of men acting as allies in the broader struggle for gender equality. Patriarchy, she noted, affects both men and women, and addressing it requires shared responsibility rather than confrontation.

Concluding the session, she emphasised the power of dialogue as a tool for social progress. While conversations around gender often intensify around occasions such as International Women's Day, she argued that meaningful change requires sustained engagement throughout the year. "Our vocabulary today has become increasingly aggressive," she observed, suggesting that such language

can sometimes create barriers rather than bridges. What is needed, she said, is the cultivation of personal and collective languages that allow individuals, especially women to articulate their experiences openly.

## PANEL DISCUSSION 4

### BEARING THE BRUNT, DRIVING THE SOLUTIONS: WOMEN AND CLIMATE ACTION



(From left – Aarushi Nishank, Dr. Sonali Ghosh, Prakriti Srivastava, Ruchi Kashyap, Anju Bisht, Gargi Rawat)

Climate change is increasingly recognised as one of the defining challenges of the 21st century, yet its impacts are neither uniform nor gender neutral. Across many regions, women often face disproportionate vulnerabilities due to unequal access to land, finance, information, and decision-making spaces. At the same time, women are also emerging as powerful agents of climate action, leading conservation initiatives, strengthening community resilience, and innovating sustainable solutions at the grassroots. These themes were at the heart of the panel discussion titled “Bearing the Brunt, Driving the Solutions: Women and Climate Action”. Moderated by senior journalist Gargi Rawat, the session brought together diverse voices from conservation, grassroots development, environmental advocacy, and sustainable innovation.

Opening the discussion, Gargi Rawat emphasised that climate change cannot be understood solely through environmental metrics; it must also be viewed through the lens of social equity. Women, particularly in rural and forest-dependent communities, experience the effects of climate disruption most directly, whether through water scarcity, declining agricultural productivity, or biodiversity loss. Yet their contributions to ecological stewardship often remain under-recognised.

Drawing from her extensive experience in forest governance, Ms. Prakriti Srivastava, former Principal Chief Conservator of Forests in Kerala, highlighted the crucial role women play in sustaining ecosystems and protecting biodiversity. She noted that women living in forest-fringe communities often possess deep traditional ecological knowledge, which can inform more sustainable conservation strategies. “Environmental protection cannot succeed without community participation,” she emphasised, adding that empowering women within local institutions strengthens both conservation outcomes and social resilience.

Dr. Sonali Ghosh, Field Director of Kaziranga National Park, echoed this sentiment while reflecting on her work in wildlife conservation and protected area management. As the first woman Field Director of Kaziranga National Park, she underscored how inclusive conservation models are essential for long-term ecological sustainability. Effective environmental governance, she argued, must integrate local communities into decision-making processes, ensuring that conservation efforts support both biodiversity protection and community livelihoods. She stressed that women’s leadership within conservation initiatives often brings a collaborative and long-term perspective to environmental management.

The discussion also explored how environmental activism and cultural engagement can mobilise wider public participation in climate action. Ms. Aarushi Nishank, National Convener of the Sparsh Ganga Foundation, spoke about the role of social movements and community campaigns in strengthening environmental awareness. Through initiatives under the Sparsh Ganga Foundation, she highlighted efforts to restore rivers, promote ecological responsibility, and encourage youth participation in conservation efforts. She emphasised that environmental awareness must move beyond policy discussions and become embedded in everyday social practices.

Offering a grassroots development perspective, Ms. Ruchi Kashyap, Executive Trustee of Atmashakti Trust, described how climate change directly affects vulnerable communities, particularly tribal populations dependent on natural resources. Through the work of Atmashakti Trust in Odisha, she explained how community-driven initiatives can build climate resilience by strengthening livelihoods, promoting sustainable agriculture, and encouraging collective action. Empowering women within these communities, she noted, has proven critical for sustaining local adaptation strategies and ensuring long-term development outcomes.

The panel also examined innovative solutions that link environmental sustainability with public health and social equity. Ms. Anju Bisht, Managing Director of Saukhyam Reusable Pads, discussed the environmental implications of menstrual waste and the importance of promoting reusable products as a climate-positive alternative. Through the Saukhyam Foundation and the CARE initiative, she highlighted how sustainable menstrual health solutions not only reduce plastic waste but also contribute to broader climate mitigation goals. Such initiatives demonstrate how grassroots innovation can simultaneously address environmental and social challenges.

Throughout the discussion, panellists emphasised that women should not only be seen as victims of climate change but as leaders shaping practical and locally grounded solutions. From forest conservation and wildlife management to grassroots development and sustainable innovation, women across India are already driving climate action in diverse ways.

The session ultimately reinforced a central message of the conference: achieving the vision of Viksit Bharat @2047 requires not only addressing climate challenges but also ensuring that women are placed at the forefront of designing and implementing solutions. Women's knowledge, leadership, and innovation will be indispensable in shaping a more sustainable and resilient future. The discussion repositioned women not as passive victims of climate change, but as frontline actors designing adaptive and locally viable solutions.

## PANEL DISCUSSION 5

### WOMEN REDEFINING INDIAN LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE



*(From Left – Dr. Chhavi Vasisht, Kalyani Raj, Chhavi Rajawat, Col. Rajeev Agarwal, Venu Dhingra, Bhakti Sharma, Sikta Deo)*

This panel discussion brought together women leaders from politics, civil society and grassroots governance to examine the evolving role of women in India's democratic institutions. Moderated by Sikta Deo, the discussion opened with the observation that politics remains the central arena of power in democratic societies. Understanding the journeys of women who have shaped public life, the panel suggested, is therefore essential to understanding the trajectory of India's democracy.

Kalyani Raj, Patron, All India Women's Conference, reflected on her transition from a career in banking to working in the social sector. What began as a gradual shift, she said, eventually became a deeply personal commitment shaped by her experiences of gender bias in the corporate world. Recalling her early professional years, Raj described encountering structural barriers faced by women in workplaces, including differential treatment during official inspections and the absence of basic sanitation facilities for female employees. Such experiences, she noted, revealed the systemic inequalities that persist across professional environments. She also highlighted financial illiteracy among women as a continuing challenge and stressed that meaningful gender participation must move beyond symbolic representation.

The discussion then shifted to grassroots governance with Chhavi Rajawat who spoke about leaving a corporate career to serve as the elected head of Soda village. Rajawat described the decision as a defining moment in her life, shaped by the trust villagers placed in her family's legacy of public service. During her tenure, she worked to bridge administrative gaps and strengthen community participation in local governance. The experience, she noted, exposed social realities that were far removed from corporate life and deepened her commitment to addressing emerging issues such as climate change and technological change through better policy frameworks. Reflecting on leadership styles, Rajawat argued that women often bring empathy and dialogue-driven approaches to governance. In her view, consensus-building and inclusive engagement can produce more sustainable outcomes than adversarial politics.

The conversation then turned to the broader historical trajectory of women in Indian politics. Venu Dhingra highlighted how women have played transformative roles across political parties throughout India's democratic history. She pointed out that India produced a woman prime minister in Indira Gandhi at a time when many countries could scarcely imagine a woman occupying the highest political office. Yet, she cautioned that the struggle for gender equality in politics remains incomplete. Patriarchal structures, she said, continue to influence access to political opportunities, particularly when it comes to securing party nominations for elections.

Women often approach governance with a distinctive perspective shaped by their lived experiences, she added. Because they frequently manage responsibilities related to health, household welfare and community well-being, they bring practical insights and empathy into policymaking. The panel also highlighted a shifting electoral reality. In several states, including Bihar and Assam, women voters have emerged as a decisive political constituency, demonstrating growing engagement and turnout in elections.

Building on this discussion, Bhakti Sharma of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha emphasised that increasing women's participation in politics requires structural reform rather than symbolic inclusion. She pointed to the long-standing debate around women's reservation in legislative bodies and argued that institutional mechanisms mandating representation could significantly accelerate progress. Once political parties are required to field women candidates, she said, they will be compelled to identify, train and support new leadership. Sharma also stressed the importance of strengthening women's presence within party structures at every level—from booth-level committees to state leadership. Greater participation at these foundational levels, she noted, allows women to move from the margins of political activity into core decision-making roles.

Concluding the discussion, speakers emphasised that while institutional support is essential, political space is rarely handed over automatically. From local panchayats to Parliament, pathways for participation already exist, but women must also step forward to claim them through grassroots engagement, financial independence and active involvement in public life. True diversity in governance, the panel agreed, emerges when institutions intentionally create space — and when women confidently step into that space to shape the country's democratic future.

## FIRE SIDE CHAT 3

### DIPLOMACY THROUGH HER LENS: WOMEN LEADING GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT



(From left - HE Diana Mickevičienė, HE Mahishini Colonne, HE Mary M. Mutuku, HE Marje Luup, Shishir Priyadarshi)

The fireside chat titled “Diplomacy Through Her Lens” brought together senior women diplomats to discuss their professional journeys, the evolving role of women in foreign services, and the institutional dynamics that continue to shape diplomatic careers. The conversation was moderated by Mr Shishir Priyadarshi, and featured Marje Luup, Ambassador of Estonia to India; Mahishini Colonne, High Commissioner of Sri Lanka; Diana Mickevičienė, Ambassador of Lithuania; and Mary M. Mutuku of Kenya.

Opening the session, Mr. Priyadarshi situated the discussion within the broader context of gender representation in diplomacy. Referring to the diplomatic community in New Delhi, he noted that a little over thirty women ambassadors are currently posted in the capital. While this reflects important progress, he remarked, it also highlights how far diplomatic institutions still have to go in achieving balanced representation.

Reflecting on her own experiences, Ambassador Mickevičienė observed that gender identity sometimes continues to surface in professional diplomatic spaces. Although women have gained greater representation, she noted that female diplomats are occasionally made conscious of being “women first and diplomats second.” She added that earlier in India, male counterparts were often prioritised in formal settings, though this dynamic is gradually changing. Addressing perceptions about gender equality in Europe, she explained that most European diplomatic systems do not rely on reservation or positive discrimination policies. With high levels of female participation in the workforce and limited

domestic support structures, responsibilities at home and at work are more commonly shared, making gender roles less rigid in practice.

High Commissioner, Colonne offered a different perspective, emphasising the importance of professional identity beyond gender labels. “I do not see myself as a ‘woman diplomat’. I see myself as a diplomat who happens to be a woman,” she said, adding that effective leadership depends on clarity of purpose, fairness in decision-making and consistency in managing teams. Drawing comparisons between Sri Lanka and India, she highlighted Sri Lanka’s long history of women in political leadership, including the election of the world’s first woman prime minister, Sirimavo Bandaranaike. Women have also maintained strong representation within Sri Lanka’s foreign service without formal reservation policies, although subtle preferences can still shape leadership dynamics.

Ambassador Mutuku highlighted the challenges faced by women in relatively young diplomatic services. In many societies where leadership has traditionally been male-dominated, she noted, women often have to work harder to establish credibility. Factors such as age and seniority can further complicate perceptions. She also emphasised the potential for stronger India–Kenya cooperation in diplomatic training and capacity building, drawing on shared colonial histories and vibrant diaspora ties.

Ambassador Luup presented a contrasting picture from Estonia, where women constitute nearly two-thirds of the country’s diplomatic workforce. Estonia has also had women serve as both prime minister and president, she noted, and gender rarely acts as a barrier in decision-making spaces. Instead, professional experience or seniority may sometimes influence authority dynamics.

During the question-and-answer session, the diplomats also reflected on expectations placed on women leaders. Ambassador Mickevičienė cautioned against idealising women or placing disproportionate expectations on them, noting that mistakes made by women are often judged more harshly than those made by men. Offering advice to aspiring diplomats, Mutuku encouraged young women to seek mentorship from experienced professionals and learn from their lived experiences. Luup advised embracing mistakes as part of professional growth, while Colonne stressed the importance of openness, humility and recognising the value of every diplomatic posting. Concluding the session, High Commissioner Colonne reflected on the broader significance of women’s participation in diplomacy. “What women bring to the table is not necessarily a different decision,” she said, “but a different set of experiences.”

The discussion ultimately underscored how women diplomats across regions are shaping contemporary diplomacy, even as institutions continue to evolve toward greater representation and inclusivity. And one of the key learning from the discussion was that as global diplomacy becomes more networked and multi-stakeholder driven, diversity in representation—including gender—will increasingly shape how countries negotiate influence and build partnerships.

## PANEL DISCUSSION 6

### CHANGING THE SCRIPT: WOMEN IN MEDIA



*(From left – Abhay Pratap Singh, Sarika Batra, Antara Lahiri, Puja Yadav, Sheela Bhatt, Joyeeta Basu, Archana Borhade, Abhyudaya Swami)*

This session featuring prominent women from the media and film industries examined how storytelling shapes society and why women must play a larger role in shaping the narratives that define public culture. Moderated by Joyeeta Basu, Journalist, the panel began with a broader reflection on the power of narratives and reflected on gender biases, structural barriers and the changing role of women in India's evolving media landscape. She highlighted the importance of broadening conversations around gender equality. Discussions on women's issues, she argued, must not remain confined to women alone. "Men must also participate in advancing gender justice," she said, emphasising that structural reform requires collective engagement.

The discussion noted that media does not merely reflect society but actively shapes public imagination. As India moves toward its vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, they argued, women-led development must also include women-led storytelling. True equality in media, they emphasised, is not just about representation on screen but about authorship — who writes, edits, frames and decides the stories that reach audiences.

Archana Borhade, Cinematographer, pointed to long-standing gender divisions within the film industry. Traditionally, she said, women were often limited to roles such as costume design, makeup or choreography, while technical fields like cinematography and direction were considered male domains. She reflected on the historical absence of women directors in cinema. Even films centred on women's lives, she noted, were often directed by male filmmakers. While many produced sensitive portrayals, the lack of women behind the camera meant that the industry remained largely shaped by male perspectives.

The conversation explored how gender roles continue to influence professional environments within the film industry. Antara Lahiri, Film Editor, noted that some departments are perceived as more “acceptable” for women due to stereotypes. Film editing, for instance, is often described as a “woman’s profession,” shaped by comparisons to traditionally feminine activities such as stitching or nurturing. At the same time, she pointed out that the industry’s demanding work culture can create significant challenges. Editors frequently work extremely long hours, sometimes up to 16–18 hours a day, schedules that rarely account for women’s health or personal responsibilities. Women who raise such concerns risk being labelled difficult or losing professional opportunities.

Safety concerns were also highlighted as a persistent challenge. Media professionals often work late into the night or travel alone to unfamiliar locations. Panellists noted that many women have learned to normalise unsafe conditions out of professional necessity, even though speaking up about safety can sometimes lead to fewer opportunities. The panel also addressed the intersection of professional ambition and family expectations. Borhade observed that careers in filmmaking often demand long and unpredictable working hours, which can be difficult to balance with traditional expectations placed on women within families. Success in such professions, she noted, often depends on having supportive partners and family structures.

Despite these challenges, speakers acknowledged that Indian society has witnessed significant progress in the past two decades. Women today have greater access to education, employment and financial independence. The growing trend of couples maintaining separate finances, once uncommon, was cited as a marker of increasing agency and autonomy for women.

Sheela Bhatt, Senior Journalist, observed that India is undergoing rapid social transformation, accelerated by social media and changing public discourse. Long-standing stereotypes — such as the notion that women must choose between beauty and intelligence — are gradually being dismantled as women enter professions historically dominated by men. The conversation also explored the idea of the “female gaze” in cinema. Antara Lahiri spoke about her experience working on the series *Four More Shots Please!*, which featured an all-women core creative team. The project, she said, created a more collaborative and conscious creative environment, highlighting how women storytellers often bring different sensibilities and perspectives to their work.

Ultimately, the session underscored that achieving genuine equality in media requires more than increasing the number of women visible on screen. It requires structural change, shared responsibility and a rethinking of how creative industries value women’s contributions. Rewriting the cultural script, the speakers concluded, is essential not only for the media industry but for building a more equitable society.

## FIRE SIDE CHAT 4

### STRENGTH BEHIND THE GOALPOST: SAVITA PUNIA ON SPORT, SACRIFICE AND SUCCESS



*(From left – Savita Punia, Shishir Priyadarshi)*

The concluding moments of the conference were marked by an inspiring conversation with Savita Punia, captain of the India women’s national field hockey team and widely known as the “Great Wall of India.” A recipient of both the Padma Shri and the Arjuna Award, Punia joined Mr Priyadarshi for a brief conversation to formally close the day-long conference dedicated to women-led development. Reflecting on her journey, Punia spoke about the path that took her from a small village in Haryana to becoming one of India’s most celebrated hockey players.

Her career, marked by perseverance and resilience, has made her a central figure in India’s recent successes in international women’s hockey. Her story, she explained, began at the age of 13 when a teacher at her government school suggested that she try her hand at sports. What began as a simple recommendation soon became a defining turning point in her life. For her family, the opportunity to move from a rural setting to pursue sports training in the city was seen as a moment of great possibility. Punia emphasised that family support played a crucial role in shaping her career. Despite domestic challenges — including her mother’s illness at the time — her family chose to prioritise her sporting ambitions. That decision, she noted, laid the foundation for everything that followed. Her grandfather, in particular, proved instrumental in guiding her path. When she was offered the choice between several sports, including judo and badminton, he encouraged her to pursue hockey. Drawing from an experience he had witnessed years earlier in Delhi, he believed the sport offered greater opportunity. In her early training years, Punia initially played as a defender. The transition to becoming a goalkeeper came later, when a coach recognised her physical attributes and suggested that she might excel in that position. Though the shift required significant adjustment, it ultimately became the defining move of

her career. She recalled how her father, despite earning a modest income, invested in the professional equipment required for goalkeeping. That sacrifice became a powerful source of motivation. For Punia, the fact that her parents placed such faith in her abilities without hesitation, reinforced her determination to succeed. Her selection to the Indian national team in 2007 marked a turning point. At the time, she said, her goal was simply to represent India once before returning home. But the recognition that followed transformed both her career and her family's outlook.

One particularly memorable moment came when a newspaper report identified her as the granddaughter of Ranjit Singh Punia from her village. The public recognition deeply moved her grandfather, who proudly preserved the newspaper clipping and resolved to learn to read so that he could follow her achievements himself. Punia also acknowledged the influence of earlier Indian hockey icons such as Mamata Kharab and Surinder Kaur, whose success in the 2002 Commonwealth Games had inspired a generation of players. Their achievements demonstrated that excellence in sport could translate into leadership and opportunity.

During the interaction, Punia spoke candidly about the responsibilities that come with leading the national team. Captaincy, she said, brings both pressure and accountability, requiring discipline and constant effort to support the team. Throughout the conversation, however, she repeatedly returned to the importance of family. Despite her global recognition, she remains closely connected to her village and continues to prioritise her parents' happiness. Her journey, she reflected, stands as a reminder that talent flourishes when supported by belief, opportunity and perseverance — values that resonated strongly with the broader theme of the conference celebrating women's leadership and empowerment.

The chat encapsulated one of the key messages of the conference, that talent and potential to contribute exists everywhere, but it is support systems, opportunity structures, and belief that transform potential into national achievement.

## WEAVING EMPOWERMENT THROUGH DASTANGOI



*(Fouzia Dastango and her team)*

After a rewarding day of enriching conversations shaping the vision of Sashakt Nari, Viksit Bharat, the evening concluded on a melodious and deeply evocative note. Music, art, and storytelling have for centuries served as powerful mediums to carry messages across the world. They do not merely inform; they move people, stirring both thought and feeling in equal measure. What better way, then, to culminate the conference than through music, so that the intent of the day could transform into an impact more intimate, memorable, and lasting.

Sometimes, progress begins with the right question, and storytelling has a way of asking it with honesty. Ms. Fouzia Dastango, India's first female dastangoi artist, along with her brilliant team, led the audience through the musical tribute, *Nari Hindustan Ki*. The performance traced the many voices of Indian womanhood—its silences, struggles, courage, and triumphs—while echoing a powerful insistence that women must not only participate in history, but also be heard within it. Moving across poetry, art, politics, sport, science, and nation-building, the tribute celebrated the women who have shaped India's journey and reaffirmed that a truly developed India can only be built on the strength, dignity, and aspiration of its women.

As the evening drew to a close, the performance left behind not just applause, but reflection. It reinforced, through melody and storytelling, that the making of a Viksit Bharat rests upon recognising, celebrating, and strengthening the voices of its women. In that sense, the cultural evening was not merely an end, but a powerful continuation of the conference's central message.

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## KEY MESSAGE

Across discussions, a clear and consistent consensus emerged: women-led development is no longer a peripheral social agenda but a structural necessity for India's economic, social, and institutional transformation. What became evident through the diversity of voices—from policymakers and corporate leaders to grassroots entrepreneurs and global diplomats—is that the question is no longer about inclusion in its traditional sense, but about repositioning women as central drivers of growth, innovation, and governance. The barriers that persist—whether in the form of unpaid care burdens, limited access to capital, institutional biases, or deeply embedded social norms—are not isolated challenges, but interconnected constraints that directly shape India's development trajectory.

The discussions also underscored that progress cannot be measured merely by rising participation rates or symbolic representation. The real shift lies in enabling agency, decision-making power, and systemic influence. From women entrepreneurs building scalable enterprises, to rural collectives transforming local economies, to leaders reshaping institutions in law, media, climate action, and diplomacy, the contours of this transformation are already visible. Yet, these examples also highlight a critical gap: while individual success stories are multiplying, the broader ecosystem, spanning policy design, financial systems, labour markets, and cultural attitudes, must evolve more rapidly to sustain and scale this momentum.

Echoing the spirit of International Women's Day 2026 and its theme "Give to Gain," the conference underscored a simple but powerful idea: when societies invest in women's empowerment, the gains are not just economic or social or political but rather intergenerational and collective. Therefore, it is when societies choose to give opportunities, resources and support to women, the entire nation stands to gain.

As India approaches its centenary of independence in 2047, the pathway to becoming a developed nation will depend not only on economic expansion, but on how equitably and effectively that growth is structured. Women-led development, in this context, is not an aspirational ideal but a strategic imperative—one that has the potential to unlock productivity, deepen markets, strengthen institutions, and drive intergenerational change. The central question, therefore, is no longer whether women will participate in India's growth story, but whether systems—public and private alike—will transform fast enough to enable them to lead it.

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*In a thought-provoking essay, retired officer Gitanjali Singh argues that women's leadership in uniformed services is limited not by ability but by institutional design. Drawing from her experience in the Indian Air Force, she calls for equity-driven systems that retain merit beyond symbolism.*

Wg Cdr Gitanjali Singh | Updated: Monday, February 23, 2026, 02:05 PM IST

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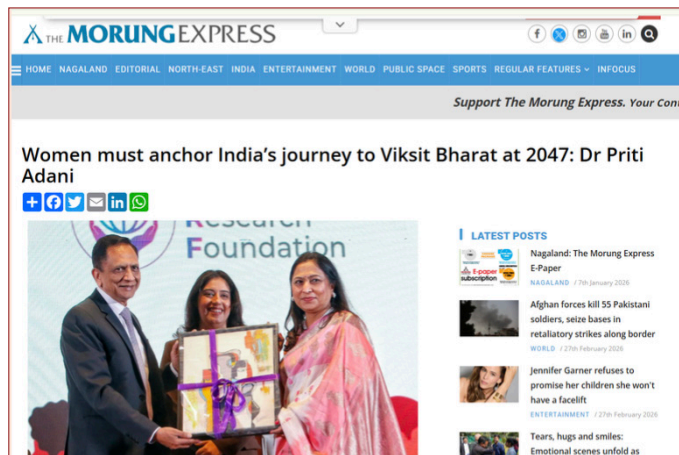
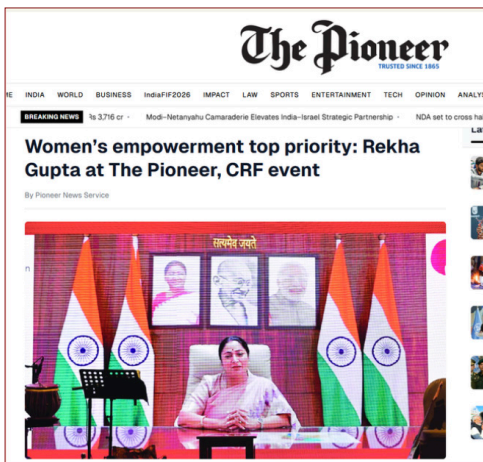
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### Women must anchor India's journey to Viksit Bharat at 2047: Dr Priti Adani













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