

International Women's Day at IGNCA

IGNCA joined the global community with the International Women's Day celebrations on 8 March, 2017. The efforts of IGNCA's Narivada Prakalpa under the guidance of Dr. Sushma Jatoo culminated in a day-long conclave followed by cultural performances by women artistes representing some of the traditional art-forms usually dominated by male artistes.

International Women's Day commemorates the movement for women's rights each year since 1909. The day is also recognised by the United Nations as the Day for Women's Rights and International Peace marks a celebration of women's achievements throughout history and across nations.

At Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, the day began with a *Mangalacharan* where Dr. Rekha Kumari, a teacher and artiste sang Vedic hymns and bhajans to mark the auspicious beginning of the day. . This was followed by the opening of the conclave titled 'Women's World: Choices, Challenges and future Possibilities'. The conclave constituted of women from different walks of life, sharing their personal experiences and perspectives along with the challenges they have been facing in their professional and personal lives. The opening session brought together Ms Malini Awasthi, eminent folk artiste, Ms Rathi Vinay Jha, Senior bureaucrat, Trustee, IGNCA and Founder of NIFT, Prof. Madhu Khanna, noted art-historian and Tagore National Fellow at National Museum, Delhi, Ms. Neera Misra of the Draupadi Dream Trust, Prof. Shashi Tiwari of the Sanskrit Department, DU, Dr. Gayane Mousisyan, a young Armenian cardiologist who works at the Rashtrapati Bhavan and Ms. Nehha Bhatnagar, Bharatanatyam artiste and founder of the organisation Sarvam and Ms. Vinita Srivastava, Joint-Secretary, IGNCA. In this session, Dr. Sushma Jatoo welcomed the gathering and introduced the theme and laid emphasis on traditional Indian viewpoint of treating women with utmost respect, i. e. "*yatra naryastu pujoyante ramante tatra devata*", or where women are adored, there gods dwell. She also acknowledged the contribution and guidance of Dr. Sachchidanand Joshi, Member-Secretary, IGNCA for conceptualising the format of the programme. After this, Dr. Mangalam Swaminathan of IGNCA briefly introduced the activities of IGNCA to the audiences.

Then, many pertinent aspects relating to women and patriarchy were raised and discussed. Ms. Malini Awasthi spiritedly shared anecdotes about the privilege as well as the challenges that she was born into, her life as a married woman and the years of experience she has gathered traveling all over the country and abroad as a female artiste with a troupe made up mostly of men. She advised us against constantly measuring women against men or against male centric notions, questioning words like "tom-boy". She pointed out how they take away from an individual persona through use of homogenising gender-based categories. She also reminisced the women who taught her strength and resilience and helped her lay the rock-solid foundation she now stands on.

Ms Rathi Vinay Jha too bared her heart out and shared a personal story of struggle in a man's world, and the need to stand up for one's rights and for what one believes in. She said she was glad to note the prominent presence of the male officials of the IGNCA family to attend the conclave, and wisely voiced the need to include more men in such discussions

and the need to acknowledge that neither men nor women would be able to bring about the required changes working as separate groups and in isolation.

The presentations and discussions that followed brought myriad female voices to the fore, all from different professional circles and from varied economic strata. Prof.. Madhu Khanna delineated the activities of Narivada Prakalpa of IGSCA and spoke of the need to step beyond the western feminism and to develop an indigenous feminist ideology that the Indian women can relate to within her cultural context. Both Prof. Khanna as well as Ms. Neera Misra of Draupadi Dream Trust looked back to female voices from our mythological heritage. Ms Misra got everyone thinking of the questions that are thrown our way in the *Mahabharata* in general and in the Draupadi legend particularly. She hinted that it is time we re-examine our categories of good and bad and acknowledge the patriarchal shortcomings of the society we inhabit.

Prof. Shashi Tiwari referred to Indian scriptures and Sanskrit literature and made a Power Point presentation regarding the journey of Indian woman from Vedic times to the modern day. She also presented a comparison of women's role in society then and now, urging one to re-examine the changing position of women vis-à-vis various aspects of society and the reasons behind such changes. She stressed on the need to striking a balance between traditional values and modernity. The young Armenian cardiologist prompted the audience to look beyond the man-made barriers of religion and geography and recognise the commonalities that run through our lives binding us together in human experience. Ms. Nehha Bhatnagar, talented dance artiste and entrepreneur, prodded us to think of the privileges we take for granted while also explaining her philosophy that one must keep working towards one's goals and they are sure to become a reality through collective efforts of oneself and the forces that be.

The discussion following lunch brought to one platform identities that are making India proud, and selflessly endeavouring to make our city, our country a better, safer place for women. The discussants included Dr. Rama, the Principal of Hansraj College, Delhi University, Ms. Namita Wahni, alumni of Harvard University and presently from the Centre for Policy Research, Ms. Hema Biswa and Ms. Ankita Ray, both filmmakers, Ms. Meenakshi Kaushal, female metro train operator from DMRC, , Inspector Ms. Chandrakanta and Sub-inspector Ms. Sunita, from Delhi Traffic Police , Ms. Poonam, Cab driver, Ms. Preeti, Ms. Usha, Ms. Pushpa and Ms. Bhageshwari- who work at IGL Gas stations. All of them shared their stories from their professional and personal lives and also shared the kind of situations and hardships that they have encountered, and their approaches on how to get on in today's world. This session was moderated by Ms. Vinita Srivastava, JS, IGSCA.

The evening too resounded with bold female voices. Ms. Krantigeeta Mahabal, famous Kirtankar from Mumbai engaged the audience with her interactive Kirtans. She sang of the young Manu, better known as *Jhansi ki Rani*, a mischievous, bright girl, who went on to become an epitome of female grit and valour. Following this Kirtan performance was a Hari-katha narration by Ms. Uma Maheshwari. She is an exponent of the Telugu and Sanskrit Hari-katha, the much-acclaimed woman Hari Katha artiste; she narrated Kalidasa's Kumarasambhavam and kept the audience enchanted. The final performance for the day was by Ms. Rina Das Baul and her two accompanying artistes from Shantiniketan. The Baul,

a folk tradition of West Bengal considers women as unique beings, worthy of celebration and reverence. Ms. Rina's songs in Bangla, were centred around women's issues to mark the occasion. She sang lovingly of *Ganga, Jamuna, Saraswati* and the audience found itself euphoric.

The Joint Secretary, IGNC, Ms. Vinita Srivastava participated actively throughout the day's proceedings and stated that this was perhaps the most wonderful day for her since she joined IGNC in February, 2017. She thanked all the panellists and performers along side, women and men officials of the IGNC family for participating and working towards the successful organization of the Women's Day Conclave and performances.

8 March at IGNC was all about destroying divisive categories and labels that are enforced upon women and embracing all women with their shared and unique experiences, learning from each other and finding strength through common human experiences.