

# WOMAN POWER HAS

## WOMEN'S DAY SPECIAL

**On Women's Day centenary, here's a look at where feminist discourse in India is headed**

By Poornima Joshi in New Delhi

**A** DELICIOUS irony on the centenary of the International Women's Day on March 8 is the number of free beauty and spa treatments being advertised in the run-up to celebrate the occasion.

The beauty blitzkrieg may signal the corporate hijack of yet another political event, but it also reflects the complex perceptions about feminism and gender in post-globalisation India. In the mass media's reductionist jargon, many will refer to these perceptions as the "mainstreaming" of feminism.

So, we have the founder-editor of *Mosasa*, a journal on women and society, asserting that she doesn't like to be called a feminist because she is not part of any "sums". "I do not like the tag of being a feminist. I may believe in Gandhi, but I am not a Gandhian. It is true of all 'sums'. I don't believe in any 'sums'." Madhu Kishwar says.

There would be many who espouse the "I'm not a feminist" line, though not necessarily for the same reasons as Kishwar's.

A primary factor in feminism being labelled "ugly", before of course the beauty brigade earnestly got down to prettifying one and all to commemorate the Women's Day, is the propensity to downgrade any discourse that is political in nature.

"When an empowered woman says she is not a feminist, she is rejecting the paternalistic construct, although she has no qualms about enjoying the individual freedom that came with it," says Manasi Sethy, a member of the faculty of Jamia Millia Islamia.

"The fact is, no one has a problem if women's empowerment can sell consumer goods. In fact, the Indian market recognises the potential too late. In the West, we've had cigarette brands being sold in the name of feminism. It is politics that challenges the status quo that people are opposed to," he adds.

What Sethy is referring to is the



## THE FAIR SEX GETS ITS DAY

- The need for a day dedicated to women was first expressed by the Second International conference in 1910, when a women's conference was held in Copenhagen to take account of the changing and arduous conditions of work
- On March 19, 1911, the first International Women's Day was marked in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland
- In 1975, the UN declared March 8 as the International Day for Women's Rights and International Peace

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per cent girls in India continue studies due to inadequate sanitary facilities in schools. Delhi govt will soon make available sanitary napkins free in all its schools.

**AIR INDIA** will operate 12 all-women-crew flights on Tuesday morning to mark the international women's day centenary. The airline will also offer special fares for all domestic women passengers flying Air India on March 8.

The Maharka will also operate an all-women-crew international flight from the Indira Gandhi International airport to Toronto on Tuesday. The flight will be flagged off by civil aviation secretary Nasim Zaidi.



You've come a long way, baby! Virginia Slims — Slimmer than the fat cigarettes men smoke."

The abhorrence for attracting labels such as "feminist", according to some experts, may be symptomatic of the "de-politicisation" of a day that celebrates the journey to women's empowerment.

An important instance of this "diversification" and "mainstreaming" of feminism that results in the political event that the much-derided Valentine's Day has become.

What started off as a corporate initiative to sell greeting cards is now widely recognised as an event that marks the assertion of sexuality by women, mostly in provincial India. "I am a great supporter of Valentine's Day. It just proves we have evolved and diversified. The language of the new feminist discourse is radically different from all set notions," says Karita Srivastava of the People's Union for Civil Liberties.

"In the 60s and the 70s there was a specific need to raise consciousness; women needed to be engaged with a certain kind of politics. Things are different now and women's responses are more layered and complex," she says.

The discourse now is much more nuanced and not overtly political, as was the case with the 60s feminists. Women have diversified and started engaging with a whole lot of other issues such as caste, environment and, of course, gender.

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## Aparna Sharma, HR director, Deutsche Bank, GBS Service Centre

FEMINISM means celebrating each day with purposeful existence, the power of "Being ME", notwithstanding the fact that I belong to the fairer sex.

It's about recognising and acknowledging the undeniably fortitude and strength that lies unflapped within ME.

It's about not restricting myself to gender stereotypes, but being proud of making a mark, my successes and accomplishments at the same time having a phenomenal ability to deal with adversity, failure and rejection gracefully as a part of life.

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The government's own National Family

**In India, 35.4% women face sexual/physical violence**

Health Survey data is also an eye-opener: According to the data, in the age group of 15-49, 35.4 per cent of all women and 40 per cent of ever-married women experienced physical or sexual violence.

This is just a tiny step towards gender parity whereas we need to take giant strides.

## The fight against odds starts right from the womb

FOR EVERY 1,000 men in India, there are only 933 women. And this is an improvement from a decade ago, when the sex ratio had nosedived to an appalling 927.

Violence against women in India starts from the womb, with female foeticide, and goes on to take the shape of rape, domestic violence, dowry harassment etc.

A recent international study has shown that Indian men are more gender inequitable than their counterparts across the world. According to the International Men and Gender Equality Survey — carried out by the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) — 24 per cent Indian men who had witnessed violence

admitted to being physically violent to their partners. The figures are much higher for the first and lower for the second elsewhere in the world.

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Even the women and child development

ministry has accepted in Parliament that despite the Domestic Violence Prevention Act coming into force in 2006, dowry-related violence and the number of dowry deaths has increased. Dowry-related deaths across the country have sharply risen from 8,093 in 2007 to 8,383 in 2009.

"If we want to change gender attitudes, we need to address all social institutions and start at a young age," Ravi Verma of ICRW says. Amid this dismal state of affairs, the ray of hope is the rising number of girls going to school — from 46 per cent in 2007 to 48 per cent in 2010.

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political power to women will pave the way for their socio-economic uplift. It was with this idea that a fair number of seats have been reserved for the weaker sex in panchayats.

The widespread phenomenon of "sarpanch-patti" (husbands of women panchayat heads calling the shots) has, however, hijacked the bid to empower rural women.

But while most husbands rule by proxy, Balu Ram Dwarijan is one lucky "sarpanch-patti" who has "inherited" power from his wife.

Herman Kumari Dwarijan, 33, the sarpanch of Mismula panchayat in Durg district of Chhattisgarh, was so overwhelmed by

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constitutional responsibilities that she handed over "power" to her husband on a platter. Balu Ram was only too happy to take over the "burden" from his wife.

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# MOVED BEYOND 'ISM'

## MEANS FOR THESE BIG ACHIEVERS



### Swati Piramal, the first woman to head ASSOCHAM

FEMINISM means using your natural female instinct to do your work and respond to the world around. When I say "natural feminine instinct", I mean being nurturing and caring and at the same time remaining lively and creative, the qualities that Mother nature has blessed us with.

Feminism has been interpreted in different ways in different ages. For example, in the 1960s, it was related to female emancipa-

### Madhuri Dixit, Bollywood actor

TO ME, the middle class Indian working woman is truly the emancipated hero of our times. They are the ones who live feminism in the truest sense because they undergo the grind every day without a thought for reward.

The progress Indian society has seen is mainly because of her. She is the real fighter — focused, hardworking, powerful, knowledgeable and practical enough to take decisions for herself, her home and her workplace.

Feminism for me is all about wearing several hats with convenience.

It's about a woman being powerful yet sensitive. This is something only a woman can do. Feminism is striking the perfect combination of talent, ability to take decision, being lovable and sensitive.



### Rina Dhaka, fashion designer

FEMINISM is when a woman doesn't play the gender card to her unfair advantage. But apart from this, feminism is also about being a good human being.

To know that everyone, no matter which gender, has basic human rights that shouldn't be violated at any cost. There's nothing that the women of today can't do or achieve. As a society, we should work towards doing away with restrictive ideas and encouraging women to walk the extra mile using their inherent strengths.

### Chanda Kochhar, MD & CEO of ICICI bank

FEMINISM is recognising women as agents of sustained socio-economic growth and change.

In order to achieve this, we need to create a gender neutral, merit-oriented work environment that does not favour one gender over the other and we need to mentor the women in the work force,

engaging them in the process of economic growth is a critical factor, crucial to ensuring the long-term sustainability of social development and economic prosperity.



### Mallika Sarabhai, dancer & activist

THAT we have to declare International days for various things is in itself alarming — it means that whatever the day is for, in this case, us — is at risk.

We can only become liberated if we are genuinely liberated from within. Liberation is to be freed of the overarching shadow of societal assessment of myself. And the willingness to take the consequences of that action.

Most of all, it's about not being apologetic about being a woman — not even deep down where we never had the courage to dig and look.

## Sarpanch hands over her 'burden' to husband

MORE political power to women will pave the way for their socio-economic uplift. It was with this idea that a fair number of seats have been reserved for the weaker sex in panchayats. But the state apparently found it "inconvenient for a woman" to deliver the responsibilities that are expected from a sarpanch.

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"This is a gross violation of the Panchayati Raj Act. The post of sarpanch is constitutional and can neither be inherited nor transferred. I have asked Durg's district collector to investigate it and take disciplinary action against the guilty," Atok Awasthi, director of panchayat and social welfare, said.

Interestingly, in her authority letter, the sarpanch said in case of any irregularity committed by her husband, she would be accountable and would be prepared to face the action. Kumari said she had delegated the authority to her husband willingly and not "under any pressure or fear".

Sohar Khan in Raipur