

CHECK FAKE NEWS

The rise of the internet and social media has indeed transformed the way we consume news and information. While traditional media like newspapers went through editorial processes and fact-checking before publishing, the landscape of digital media allows for instantaneous sharing of information, sometimes without proper verification. The spread of fake news on social media platforms has become a significant concern. False information can easily go viral, reaching millions of people before it's corrected or debunked. This phenomenon poses a threat to public trust and can have real-world consequences, from influencing elections to inciting violence. Addressing the issue of fake news requires a multifaceted approach. Education plays a crucial role in helping people develop critical thinking skills to discern credible sources from misinformation.

Women in BRO: Trailblazers of Change

■ LT GEN RAJEEV CHAUDHARY (RETIRED)



BRO since its inception in 1960 had only male officers due to the nature of task and isolated deployments for prolonged periods cutting roads in tough terrains under most treacherous weather conditions along our land borders. Two decades back, handful of women officers started joining but was employed in staff appointments only keeping in view the hazards of the ground tasks. Then a historical decision was taken by DGBR on 08 Mar 21 to provide a gender neutral environment to women officers in line with current government's theme of 'Naari Sashaktikaran' and first woman officer EE (Civ) Ms Vaishali S Hiwase was posted as Officer Commanding (OC) of a Road Construction Company (RCC). She took over her assignment on 28 Apr 21 and was made responsible for one of the toughest roads of BRO, connecting Munshiyari to Milam glacier in Kumaon region of Uttarakhand. Soon after, EE (Civ) Ms Obin Taki was appointed as OC of an RCC for construction of roads and bridges in inhospitable Siang valley of Arunachal Pradesh. Following the success of this initiative, an all women RCC was established at Pipalkoti in Chamoli district and Major Aaina Rana was given the command of this RCC on 30 Aug 21. Notably, all three Platoon Commanders under her were also women officers. She was responsible for development of roads till Mana pass – the second highest pass in the country after Unlingla, perched at 18,478 feet. The RCC performed exceedingly well under her dynamic leadership. On 22 Oct 22, Prime Minister came to Mana village and laid the foundation stone for widening of this strategically important road till Mana pass. Colonel Navneet Duggal OC of a Field Workshop deployed in Kashmir valley also became the first EME officer to command a workshop in most difficult and challenging location, ensuring technical support to road construction activities in toughest terrain. Lt Col (now Colonel) Shigda Sharma became the first woman officer to head the Legal Cell in Headquarters of BRO. She efficiently managed over 700 court cases, upholding the organisation's legal integrity. All these women officers' success and singular achievements while heading their sub units, not only shattered gender barriers but also set new standards of excellence within BRO. Taking this initiative ahead, Col Archana Sood was appointed as Commander of a Task Force at Zero in Arunachal Pradesh in Feb 23. She became first woman officer to lead a Task Force in BRO. She is doing a great job taking the roads ahead in Dibang valley of Arunachal Pradesh. In Jun 23, Col Ponnung Doming was selected to head a Task Force at Hanle, Ladakh, which was shifted specially to handle some strategically very important BRO projects. She was given two more women officers in staff to assist her in undertaking construction of world's highest road at 19400 feet in Chumar sector connecting Likarú – Migla – Fukehe, world's one of the highest fighter air base at Nyoma and Chushul – Dumgti – Fukehe – Demchok road along LAC under most trying conditions. Hanle Task Force is world's highest construction agency located at 15000 feet. She is also responsible to maintain world's highest road at Unlingla connecting Demchok to Chisumle. BRO today firmly believes that women will always be active participants in the endeavour of Nation building. The multi-faceted approach of BRO towards Women Empowerment includes variety in employment roles, avenues to grow in gender neutral environment, access to proper healthcare, opportunities for adventure/sports and encouragement to develop holistically, as they play the lead roles in all walks of life. Celebrating "Azaadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav," BRO supported landmark women-led adventure activities, showcasing their strength and spirit in diverse expeditions. Highlights include a multidisciplinary expedition involving mountain trekking, white water rafting, and cycling, an all-women electric vehicle rally promoting environmental consciousness. For the first time in the history of BRO, women were given command assignments. This was a game-changer, as women officers worked hard day and night to prove their mettle. These women officers have acted as trailblazers for other women to join BRO in larger number and in turn perform to best of their abilities. Their sincere efforts have not only accelerated project timelines but also served as an effective and inspiring model for other organisations to emulate. The government has been actively promoting gender parity and women's empowerment. This push has been evident in various sectors, including defence and infrastructure development, where BRO plays a critical role.

(The writer is former DGBR).

Women in J&K Politics: Fielding female candidates in Kashmir is not a bad idea

■ SAJJAD BAZAZ

Let me begin with a quote of Rabindranath Tagore: "Woman is the builder and moulder of a nation's destiny, though delicate and soft as lily, she has a heart, stronger and bolder than that of a man, she is supreme inspiration for man's onward march."

I selectively picked his quote about women empowerment as the International Women's Day falls on March 8, 2024, and this year the day is celebrated under the theme 'Invest in women: Accelerate progress'. Frankly speaking, investing in women is on top of the list of wisest in-vestment decisions for achieving the goal of peace, prosperity and profits for all generations to come. Therefore investing in women means empowering them.

Today there is global emphasis on women empowerment as the world leadership dominated by men has found themselves surrounded by many crises, ranging from geopolitical conflicts to soaring poverty levels and the rapidly increasing impacts of climate change. It is fervently be-lieved that the solution to these crises lies in the investment in women. Precisely, investing in women turbocharges a future where everyone in a society/community can thrive, creating bound-less opportunities and empowerment for all. When we talk of empowering women, it doesn't mean it is confined to a particular sector. The empowerment has to be broad-based. Even as economic empowerment most of the time domi-nates the debates around women empowerment, I think it's the political empowerment of women which can go a long way to help societies/communities to grow in a most sustainable manner.

In other words, a considerable presence of women in politics and making it to parliament gener-ally contributes to stronger attention to women's issues. As observed in various studies on women empowerment, women's political participation is a fun-

The Pran Pratishtha Ceremony of Shri Ramlalla An Auspicious Beginning of a New Era

■ RAM LAL

On January 22, 2024, in the ancient city of Ayodhya, an unforgettable confluence of unity, reverence, devotion, and harmony was witnessed. People from every corner of the country, from diverse backgrounds and beliefs, gathered together to witness the Pran Pratishtha of Shri Ram Lalla in the grand Ram temple. The arrival of Shri Ram Lalla not only stirred a wave of enthusiasm throughout India but also spread a wave of renewed enthusiasm across the world.

This magnificent event, probably unprecedented in the history of India, showcased a unique blend of meticulous planning at the micro-level and grand inclusion at the macro-level. In Ayodhya, echo of every Indian and ancient civilization, every sentiment, and every tradition found its reflection under the shelter of Lord Shri Ram. From the secluded islands of Lakshadweep and Andaman to the distant mountains of Ladakh, from the lush forests of Mizoram and Nagaland to the sands of the Rajasthan's deserts, all 28 states and 8 union territories of India witnessed this grand event, with all languages of India echoing the sentiment that 'Ram Sabke Hain.'

The process of inviting guests began in September 2023, starting from compiling the list of invitees to personally inviting them, even reaching out to remote areas of the nation. Ultimately, each invitee was assigned a unique code. The program was entirely structured around religious, spiritual, and social themes. As a result, only the heads of national and state political parties and CM of host state were invited to the ceremony. Invitations were not extended to any central ministers or chief ministers. This was also a widely discussed topic among the invited distinguished guests on that day.

Representatives from various donor categories, ranging from those donating as little as 10 rupees to millions, were present at the event. A total of 131 prominent and 36 tribal representatives, representing different origins of the Indian ancient religious traditions, were present. This included representatives from all major traditions such as Akhadas, Kabir Panthi, Raidasi, Nirankari, Namdhari, Nihangs, Arya Samaj, Sindhi, Nimbark, Buddhists, Lingayats, Ramakrishna Mission, Satradhikar, Jains, Banjara community, Maitei, Chakna, Gorkha, Khasi, Rannanis and others. Representatives from scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and nomadic tribes were also

present. Different religions like Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism were also represented. Families of District Judge Sri Nayar, who made the decision in favor of Ramlalla in 1949, and former Duty Constable Abdul Barkat, who testified, were also invited. Family who was fighting the case against Ramlalla was also invited along with families of former officials of Ayodhya. Families of leaders of the Ram Jannabhoomi movement and lawyers who participated in the judicial process of Ram Jannabhoomi, including advocates, were also present at the event. Along with Current President and Vice President of India, former Presidents and former Prime Ministers were also invited. The event also saw the participation of retired chiefs of all three armed forces who were vigilant in ensuring India's security, as well as recipients of the Param Vir Chakra. Scientists from ISRO who led India to the moon and scientists who developed the Indian COVID vaccine were also present. Several former Chief Justices of the Supreme Court, retired judges, retired administrative and police officers along with Indian diplomats who worked in various countries were present, as were eminent lawyers, doctors, CAs, and directors/editors of newspapers and TV channels, as well as renowned social media influencers. Industrial families from large corporations were also present at the event, along with members of prominent Royal Families. Players who represented India in various sports, Artists from various fields such as painting, sculpture, music, literature, instrumental music, dance etc., including those from Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Gujarati, Bengali, Odia, Assamese, Bhojpuri, Punjabi, and Haryanvi film industries were also present.

Representatives from 53 countries were also present at the event. There were 15 Yajmans in the main puja, representing all castes and classes (Sikhs, Jains, Neo-Buddhists, Nishad society, Vahniki society, tribal society, nomadic tribes, etc.) and individuals from all directions of India (North, South, East, West, Northeast) were represented. The event also saw the presence of farmers and laborers, as well as representatives of cooperative and consumer organizations, who contribute to the nourishment and development of the country. Officials, engineers, and workers from L&T and Tata Group were also present. Several workers from the RSS and Vishwa Hindu Parishad, including revered Sarsangchalak of the RSS Hon'ble Sh. Mohan

Bhagvat and Hon'ble Prime Ministers of India Sh. Narendra Modi, also graced the occasion. If Shri Ram Lalla was being Pratishthit, then surely all the gods and goddesses must have been present to bless the occasion.

At the behest of the Shri Ram Jannabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, hundreds of Vishva Hindu Parishad workers were tirelessly engaged day and night, several workers from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and other local self-help organizations were also involved in the organization of this event. Their experience in management was subtly reflected in the arrangement of the event, which was being experienced by every devotee present there. Whether it was welcoming, arranging battery-operated vehicles, providing wheelchair facilities, or organizing entry processes, every aspect was meticulously planned. The leaders of the self-help organizations themselves were seen removing everyone's shoes and keeping them aside, even as they continued to serve during their return. Outside the makeshift toilets, arrangements for slippers were also made. Everything was prepared with careful consideration. The citizens and administration of Ayodhya, in coordination with the Trust, set out to beautify Ayodhya. It was a matter of curiosity for the common people of Ayodhya to see how the city transformed suddenly within four months. Cooperation between the Uttar Pradesh and Ayodhya police was commendable, and everyone was impressed with their cooperative behaviour. As a result, such a grand event was successfully completed with ease and success. Everyone felt blessed by Lord Shri Ram's presence.

In three days, without any political or corporate event, 71 private aircraft landed in Ayodhya. Arrangements for welcoming and transportation with Saffron Patkas were made at the airports of Lucknow and Ayodhya, as well as at railway stations in Lucknow, Ayodhya, Varanasi, Gorakhpur, Gonda, Sultanpur, Prayagraj, and others. Keeping in mind the needs of various attendees, accommodation arrangements were meticulously prepared for everyone. Tent cities, hotels, ashrams, dharamshalas, as well as arrangements for staying with 200 local families were made. The sound of the 'Ram Aayenge' song echoed throughout Ayodhya. Everyone enjoyed the cultural programs in Ayodhya's street till late night.

History bears witness that this was the only event where people of such stature sat on ordi-

nary chairs for 4-5 hours. Former Prime Minister of India, Shri HD Devegowda, sat in a wheelchair for four hours. There were no assistants or security personnel with anyone. Prasad was distributed and served to everyone while they remained seated. In Ayodhya, Regardless of caste, class, or region, everyone was equal - everyone was in unity. Everyone rose above their commitments and social-economic status to accept Ayodhya's humble and heartfelt hospitality.

Every city and village in India were eager to welcome Lord Shri Ram. Every village, every neighbourhood, and every temple had become Ayodhya. Those who couldn't make it to Ayodhya worshiped in local temples and celebrated by lighting lamps at night. Everyone's hearts and souls were in Ayodhya that day. The entire Ayodhya city and temple complex were decorated with tonnes of flowers to welcome Shri Ramlalla. More than 30 traditional musical instruments from all Indian states, played by various artists, made the atmosphere melodious with Ram bhajans. Thousands of brass bells resonated across the temple complex during the aarti. Along with Lord Ram's arrival, the helicopter showered flowers over the temple complex, making it feel as though the entire divine realm was showering flowers in joy. This event transcended mere celebration; it became a divine experience, a spiritual journey. People were emotional, some were dancing in trance, some experienced heaven, some the Treta Yuga. Everyone was returning to Ayodhya with Lord Shri Ram. From 3 am the next day, devotees began lining up for darshan of Shri Ramlalla. Nearly 5,00,000 people visited Shri Ramlalla with enthusiasm and discipline on January 23rd.

This divine event in Ayodhya surpassed the boundaries of cast, status, language, state-hood or religious-beliefs; embracing traditions while advancing progress, awakening the collective consciousness of a nation. A testament to the eternal legacy of Lord Shri Ram, inspiring millions and uniting them; this event, as the 'Ramotsav' of unity, integrity, harmony, and devotion, will remain alive for ages to come. Remembering Lord Shri Ram, it is now time for all of us to be determined to establish India as a prosperous, affluent, healthy, capable, and respected nation, to establish India as the 'Vishwa Guri'.

(The writer is Sampark Pramukh Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh).

Unveiling the Empowerment Equation: Affirmative Action for Women in India-Real Progress or Illusion?

■ DR. ALKA SHARMA

Affirmative action refers to the procedures or policies aimed to eliminate unlawful discrimination and to increase opportunities for women. In India, it has been a pivotal aspect of the empowerment equation, aiming to bridge gender disparities and foster inclusivity. Empowerment equation is to provide representation to women that contribute to increasing their abilities to take control of their life and make impactful decisions. The dire need of the hour is to delve into the effectiveness of such measures, questioning whether the progress achieved is tangible or merely an illusion. It is pertinent, first of all, to comprehend the dynamics of affirmative action in India. Initiatives like reservations in education and employment have been implemented to address systemic gender imbalances and provide women with equal opportunities. The Government initiatives viz. Beti Bachao Beti Padoo, Sukaniya Samridhi Yojana provide financial assistance for health and education of the girl child. Scholarship schemes like AICTE Prapati scholarship, etc. are given to the families with less than income of 8 lac per annum for girls studying in first year technical courses and awards & cash of 50,000 per annum and other benefits are also provided. According to Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 payment of equal remuneration to men and women is to be provided. Maternity Benefit Act, 2017 facilitated women with paid maternity for 12-26 weeks. Even mandatory crèche facility makes it possible for women to put in their best efforts even at their work place and give out best results. The various progress indicators include examining educational attainment, workforce participation, and leadership roles for women. Highlighting success stories and notable achievements



shed light on the positive impact of affirmative action in specific spheres. The economic aspect of women's empowerment is a critical dimension. Analyzing the economic status of women post-affirmative action measures can unveil whether financial independence has genuinely materialized or if there are persisting gaps. The schemes like STEEP - a Central Sector Scheme launched in 1986-87, seeks to upgrade the skill of poor and assetless women and provide employment on a sustainable basis by mobilizing them in viable cooperative groups, strengthening marketing linkages, support services, and access to credit. Programs like National Rural Livelihood Mission (erstwhile SGSY) of MoRD, Smayamsidha of MWCD and similar programs of other Ministries and organizations would need to be converged to help the identified Self Help

Groups in a coordinated fashion. Besides this, women are becoming even the voice of various sections of our society. To increase their participation in the political sphere, amendments like 73rd & 74TH have been made which reserved one-third seats for women in Panchayats and Urban Local Bodies. They are getting representation in decision-making bodies. Evaluating whether affirmative action has translated into increased political participation and influence is vital for gauging its efficacy. Considering the diverse cultural landscape of India, societal attitudes play a significant role in shaping the success of affirmative action. Understanding how cultural norms either facilitate or hinder progress is crucial in forming a comprehensive perspective. Despite affirmative action, women in India still encounter myriad challenges, ranging from societal norms to workplace biases. Unraveling these obstacles is crucial to understanding the nuances that hinder the complete realization of empowerment. Quantifying the impact of affirmative action involves examining statistical data, conducting surveys, and seeking feedback from beneficiaries. A nuanced evaluation helps discern whether these measures have genuinely empowered women or if challenges persist. Hence, it may be concluded that the empowerment equation in India, fortified by affirmative action for women, embodies both progress and challenges. By scrutinizing various facets – education, employment, economics, politics, and cultural dynamics – this article strives to unravel whether the strides made are real or if an illusion of empowerment prevails. The quest for gender equality continues, navigating the complex terrain of societal norms and policy effectiveness.

(The author is an educationist).

damental prerequisite for gender equality and genuine democracy. It facilitates women's direct engagement in public decision-making and is a means of ensuring better accountability to women.

Since we are very close to parliamentary elections in the country and leadership of various political parties is working overtime to pick the best of the lot to contest the elections, the number of women contestants would be interesting to watch. It would be a tightrope walk as all eyes will be on whether the parties make a conscious decision to field more women in the upcoming election season. Remarkably, for the BJP that earmarks 33% of all posts in the party for women has been gradually increasing the number of women candidates in elections. The party has been encouraging and grooming women leaders. The number of women MPs, legislators and ministers has been on the rise.

In the context of Jammu & Kashmir, fielding women candidates especially in the ensuing parliamentary elections would be a shot in the arm of efforts to strengthen national integration of the region after pulling it out of the terror eco-system.

Historical Perspective

A peep into the background about J&K women in politics merits a mention in the backdrop of the increasing importance of women in politics in the current political set-up. As in other states of India, the women in Jammu and Kashmir remained lower in position and problems continued to engulf them on all counts. The facts documented by experts reveal that the state subjects in J&K were first time enfranchised in 1934, but on a very limited scale. For women folk, the right to vote was limited to pass-outs of the middle standards or an equivalent examination. The Franchise commission while giving out its reason for limited voting rights of the women folk had stated; "The

inclusion of women voters would increase the administrative difficulties of the election". However, over a period of time, it was in 1951 when the state elections to the constituent Assembly were based on universal Franchise. Precisely, with the passage of time, the right of women to elect and to be elected in all institutions on the basis of equality with men and also the grant of equal rights to women in all the fields of national life including that service in the state became a reality.

Current Demand

In the dynamic landscape of Indian politics, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has consistently championed the cause of women's empowerment. However, when it comes to the Kashmir region, there's a unique opportunity for the party to not only uphold its commitment to gender equality but also to strategically advance its political agenda. As the upcoming parliamentary elections loom, it's important for the BJP to field female candidates in Kashmir for the upcoming parliamentary elections.

As we all know that Kashmir has long been marred by political turmoil and strife. In such an environment, the voice of women often gets marginalized. By fielding female candidates, the BJP can provide a credible platform for Kashmiri women who approximately represent an equal percentage to men, to actively participate in the political process and have their concerns addressed at the highest levels of governance.

The inclusion of female candidates from the BJP in Kashmir will send a powerful message of progress and inclusivity. It will also challenge the traditional norms and stereotypes - a departure from the status quo. This symbolic gesture can inspire hope and encourage more women to engage in politics, which will establish a culture of democracy and pluralism in the region.

Kashmir, like many other regions in India, grapples with various gender-based challenges, including lack of access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for women. Female politicians, with their unique perspective and lived experiences, are better equipped to understand and address these issues effectively. By electing BJP female candidates, Kashmiris can ensure that their concerns are prioritized and addressed comprehensively.

The BJP's decision to field female candidates in Kashmir will help in building trust and bridging divides within the community. Women often serve as the backbone of families and communities, and their representation in politics can create greater understanding and cooperation across different segments of society. It would be a step towards building a more cohesive and harmonious Kashmir.

From a strategic standpoint, the inclusion of female candidates can elevate the BJP's electoral prospects in Kashmir. It will broaden the party's appeal beyond traditional voter bases and demonstrate its commitment to diversity and inclusivity. Moreover, it will allow the party to present itself as a progressive force for change that in turn will attract support from a wider spectrum of voters.

If political experts are to be believed, the decision to field female candidates in Kashmir is not just a matter of political expediency; it's a moral imperative and a strategic necessity. By empowering women and amplifying their voices, the BJP can not only contribute to the development and stability of Kashmir but also reaffirm its commitment to the principles of democracy, equality, and progress. On International Women's Day, giving wings to the women of the region in as-strong political arena would further pave the way for a brighter, more inclusive future for Kashmir and its people.

(The author is a veteran journalist/columnist).