The air was electric... filled with inspiration and promise. The songs and slogans in the background sounded like a celebration as I sat on the stage, listening to speakers on why women need their share of political representation. This despite the fact that the occasion was to send an urgent call to our elected leaders to deliver a promise that has been languishing for the past 17 years!

I had rushed to Delhi on February 12th 2014 to be a part of this public meeting, barely two kilometers away from Parliament House, organised by a network of over 35 women rights organisations to demand the passing of the 33% Women’s Reservation Bill. Women constitute 49% of the population in India. In a democracy these numbers should reflect an overwhelming influence of women as voters or as leaders in parties and elected houses. But the reality is very different and women’s absence from elected state and national institutions is glaring to say the least.

To me the gathering was a reflection of how deep the aspiration for leadership runs among women. The demand seemed to border as much on an emotional calling as on addressing political inequality. Women constitute just 11 per cent of the Lok Sabha, and their representation in state-level assemblies is also very limited. The imbalance is even starker across political parties, where women members hardly 10% and nominations as candidates are even fewer.

The 33% Women’s Reservation Bill will not only address this gap in political representation but will also enable women to be involved in political party leadership. Women and girls waved small paper flags of different colours, matching with the bright saris, scarfs and shawls, as they shouted “33% Now!”

Incidentally, India has had reservation for women up to 50% in local village level elected councils or Panchayat. Every term, over a million women are elected and have created a inspiring story of change not just for themselves but for the communities they live in. This was made possible through the reservation act passed in 1991.

Then why is it so difficult for our parties and elected leaders to find the will to come together and make history that will have a cascading impact of change in women’s transformational leadership?

I have been part of a campaign that is working towards generating support on the need for the bill to be passed and be adopted across parties. There is a big support developing online through a petition and discussions.

On the last day of the current Lok Sabha, women leaders from the network realised that the Bill may not come up for the discussion.

They took a bold decision to march towards Parliament House on February 20th in a last ditch effort to get the Bill placed for discussion. Despite being detained and taken away for disturbing the peace in a sensitive area, their voicd did make it to the Lok Sabha discussions and television channels. But the 15th Lok Sabha was adjourned and with it dashed the hopes of seeing the Bill become a reality.

If the energy of women who were part of the public meeting is any indication of the solidarity on the demand, it is only a matter of time before the voice becomes too overwhelming to ignore.

By Nandita Das

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AGENT OF CHANGE : DHARANI SARKAR, ODISHA

30 trafficked girls rescued. 9 innocent people wrongly named as Naxals, being tortured by the police rescued.

Do not mistake the liberator of these wronged people to be a big, muscular superman. In reality, this brave person is a young, frail woman, who is also a wife and mother, made of a mettle that marks her as a champion.

Born and brought up in a conservative society where girls are made to marry at an early age, Dharani Sarkar of Raygada district in Odisha is an odd one out. This 35 year old had never dreamt of what she is today. Her basic education has helped her achieve and fulfill many responsibilities which have made her the community leader she is today. Most people would know her as a social worker. But Oxfam calls the select few like Dharani, ‘Agents of Change’ for having played a critical role in turning around situations for society.

Oxfam India started the process of identifying Agents of Change in March 2012, for the first time. The first event was organised by Oxfam India Hyderabad office with support of the partners in Odisha.

Not only providing inspiration to others, the felicitation also encouraged the Agents of Change, boosting their confidence and motivation to strive further towards larger change.

Oxfam India effort to acknowledge these change makers has received high appreciation from the larger civil society with a wide range of participation from Government officials, INGOs, funded and non-funded partners of Oxfam.

Oxfam India in collaboration with its NGO Partners in Odisha felicitated 17 Agents of Change in Odisha including Dharani on February 12th 2014 in Bhubaneshwar.

The occasion was graced by Manmohan Praharaj, IPS former DGP Odisha, Asha Hans, Director Samsristi and Ambika Prasad Nanda, State Program Manager UNDP.

The passion and sincerity of people like Dharani inspires us at Oxfam to encourage them further and others, by recognizing them in our effort towards making India a better, more equal and just society.

Dharani Sarkar felicitated by Manmohan Praharaj, IPS former DGP Odisha, Asha Hans, Director Samsristi and Ambika Prasad Nanda, State Program Manager UNDP
“Every hour one pregnant woman dies during or before her delivery. Every year in Bihar alone 8300 women die at the time of giving birth”, experts revealed these facts in the State People’s Health Assembly organised in Patna, Bihar on February 21, 2014 by Oxfam India in collaboration with its partner Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (JSA).

A large gathering of over 2500 women, men, VHSC members and social activists from across Bihar participated to share and discuss stories of their health needs and struggles to access health care facilities.

Welcoming participants, Avinash Kumar, Director, Policy, Research and Campaigns, Oxfam India said, “Initiatives like Swasthya Mahapanchayat take forward the demand for health rights especially for the poor and marginalized. It is important that health becomes the major issue of public concern like GDP and growth. In a country where health costs are supposed to be the second largest reason behind people going below poverty line, it is imperative that health is seen as much an issue of human right as contributing to the economic well-being of the country.”

Kumar stressed on the urgent need to prioritize public spending on health in India, considering it is among the lowest in the world. Bihar has a sorry story, lagging behind in public health spending being only one third of that in Kerala.

A community member, Salma Khatoon shared that at the time of her abortion, Public Health Centre officials demanded money from her. She was denied the services since she was unable to comply.

A strong supporter of the processes for the right to health, at the policy level, Oxfam has been raising demands for increasing public investment in health and providing quality health care for all especially for the poor and marginalized.

Dhananjay Kakade, Director, National Centre for Advocacy Studies (NCAS) said, “Community participation is extremely necessary for not only improving health services but also for maintaining better health services. The need of the hour is that the government accepts the demands and suggestions of people themselves, and based on that formulate pro-people progressive legislations.”

At end of the assembly, participants enthusiastically prepared a Charter of Demands that covered issues like ensuring health for all, regulation of private institution, community based review of maternal death cases, understanding & strengthening of the clinical establishment act and strengthening of the Jan Swasthya Abhiyan for taking up the issue of health right in the state.

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The winners of the first Mumbai Oxfam Trailwalker, a charity fundraising event, were honoured at a star-studded awards event on 22 February at Kalaghoda, Mumbai. Mr. Kiran Karnik, Chairperson of Oxfam India Governing Board and Ms. Nisha Agrawal, CEO Oxfam India gave away the award trophies to the four fastest teams and three top fundraising teams.

The participants of the first Mumbai Trailwalker collectively raised funds exceeding INR 70 lakh. This money will be used by Oxfam to support six projects in Maharashtra, Bengaluru and Delhi under the areas of education, health, livelihood and urban poverty.

Oxfam Trailwalker is the flagship fund-raising event for Oxfam and is considered the greatest team challenge requiring a four-member team to walk or run a 100km in 48 hours or less. Winning the Trailwalker challenge requires physical endurance, mental strength and an indomitable team spirit.

Ms. Nisha Agrawal, CEO, Oxfam India said, “The first Mumbai Oxfam Trailwalker has received a fantastic response from the people of Mumbai. We thank all teams who participated in the event and helped Oxfam raise money for issues that deserve our collective support.”

Mr. Kiran Karnik, Chairperson, Oxfam India Board said, “The Trailwalker is not just just a fundraising event, it serves the larger purpose of creating awareness about the serious problems that will overwhelm us if we do not act quickly.”

The funds raised from Trailwalker events across the world are utilised in projects, which work towards fighting poverty and injustice. Globally, the events have raised more than ₹135 million for Oxfam’s valuable work around the world.

The audience for the event included all Mumbai Trailwalker participants along with corporate honchos and chiefs from several reputed companies including highest number of teams HSBC, second highest teams Accenture, followed by Petrofac.

Oxfam India’s Mumbai Trailwalker was held from 15 to 17 November, 2013. 70 teams took part in the race and 191 walkers completed the 100 km challenge. Of the 16 trails across the world, the Mumbai trail has been called the most challenging with its many elevations and drops through the Sahyadaris.

‘Every Mile Counts’, the fastest all male team finished at the top spot with timing at 16h28m20s, while ‘Life of Pi’, the fastest mixed team finished at 28h30m46s. The fastest all women team, ‘Pace Setters’ finished at 38h21m16s and the fastest veteran team ‘Early Birds’ finished 36h16m00s. Also awarded at the event was the top fundraising team ‘Mumbai Walkers’ which raised an amount of ₹10,15,200.

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Donate Monthly to empower the lives of poor and marginalised and bring a lasting change. Your monthly contribution will help us continue in our mission to create a more equal, just, and sustainable world.

Enclosed is my first monthly donation of

- Rs 500 Provide coaching support to lagging children
- Rs 800 Create awareness to reduce acceptance of violence against women
- Rs 500 Create Awareness on health and hygiene in disaster prone areas.

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