

INDIAN WOMEN

Devi is the female goddess, venerated in India by the majority Hindu community as the source of primordial power, the symbol of piety and purity.

Yet, in a country of such great tradition and culture, Indian women are in the news globally for all the wrong reasons: sexual harassment and societal subjugation. In the past decade with the information boom having touched all corners of the globe, unfiltered news about India is available to all. It has meant that the focus in the past two years has been on crimes against women in India rather than on women achievers from India.

This tinge in global focus on women in India is due to the global expectations from the world's largest democracy. The world looks upon India as an emergent power and it is impossible for India to be a power in this region with half its population lagging behind.

One of India's most powerful Prime Ministers was a woman. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ruled with an iron-fist and led an almost entirely male cabinet for decades, pulling India out of famines and war, into a Green Revolution that transformed Indian agriculture. Several years later, her daughter-in-law Sonia Gandhi would take over the reins of the oldest political party in the country, lead it to victory but refuse to become Prime Minister and appointed her loyal colleague Dr Manmohan Singh instead. India's current External Affairs Minister is Sushma Swaraj who is the second woman to occupy that post, the first being Indira Gandhi.

We have many woman leaders in industry too. Chennai-born Indra Nooyi is the president and chief executive officer of PepsiCo, the world's fourth-largest food and beverage company. Fortune Magazine selected her as the Most Powerful Woman in Business in 2006. Chanda Kochhar is CEO and MD of ICICI Bank, India's largest private bank.

In sports, Sania Mirza is the highest ranked female tennis player ever from India, with a career high ranking 31 in singles and 24 in doubles. Mary Kom is a five-time World Amateur Boxing champion and the only woman boxer to have won a medal in each one of the six world championships and an Olympic medal. She has inspired hundreds of girls in the country to take up competitive sports. Equally inspiring is the young Saina Nehwal, who is the first Indian to win a medal in Badminton at the Olympics.

Indian women authors like Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai have won many international literary awards and global critical acclaim. Then there are women who work for society, tirelessly and many times without the limelight. Medha Patkar has worked for the socially downtrodden who get displaced due to mega development projects, Mother Teresa's Sisters of Charity works ceaselessly among the poor and marginalized. Ela Bhat founded the Self Employed Women Association (SEWA) that works for empowering employment among rural women.

In the field of entertainment, the list of women achievers is unending: from the golden melodious voices of Bollywood for decades, Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhonsle, to the popular and acclaimed actresses like Shabana Azmi, Meena Kumari, Aishwarya Rai and film makers like Mira Nair and Kalpana Lajmi. Blessed with such talent, Indian films, particularly those made in Mumbai, have captivated audiences across the globe.

While the list of current women achievers is impressive, the list of Indian women who stand out in history is equally stellar. Ancient texts show that women in India in the Vedic period (ca.1750-500 BCE) had access to education and enjoyed almost equal rights as men. Razia Sultan, Chand Bibi, Rani Laxmi Bai were heroic figures whose tales of bravery and courage are narrated even today. Many women leaders played stellar roles in the freedom movement, and other even ruled as queens in erstwhile princely states.

The Indian Constitution guarantees equality to all women and no discrimination by the state but it is an uphill battle in practice to break through the glass ceiling. In rural India, women constitute nearly 85 percent of the work force but they rarely own land. In urban India, they are present in offices and construction sites but are paid less than their male counterparts. With awareness increasing among Indian women about their rights and responsibilities, they are growing more assertive, ready to take on challenges and march in step with their male counterparts. In an India on the march, women will have to be an integral part of the country's success story.