Neelam Deo, Renu Khator rock women's forum

It was standing room only at the Women's Forum of the 29th AAPI convention headlined by Neelam Deo, India's consul general in New York, and Renu Khator, chancellor and president of the University of Houston.

Deo, who retires from the Indian Foreign Service this month, was the lead speaker on the topic 'Promoting Women's Voices on Pressing Global Issues and Encouraging the Next Generation of Women Leaders.'

'To me, the success of a woman or of women as a whole is something that comes from challenging ourselves as women. When we say we want this or we want equality or we want more representation, it should not be understood as a challenge to men, but as a challenge to ourselves. It is for us to move ourselves forward, to move ourselves into new spaces and to find new ways to express ourselves,' Deo said at the outset.

When it comes to global issues, Deo argued, the voice of women would be strongest in those issues where women are either the biggest beneficiaries, or victims - and thus, she said, the single biggest issue deserving of a strong woman's voice was war. 'The greatest victims of war are women - whether as refugees, whether as victims of rape, whether as losing male relatives, their husbands, their brothers, their children.'

She went on to cite the environment, public health, and violence against women among the list of critical concerns on which women needed to speak out with strength.

On health, Deo pointed out that in developing countries, the majority of people who contract AIDS are women in the age group of 10 to 44. She said this was 'part of the powerlessness of women in the man/woman equation', and pointed out that even in terms of monies allocated for research of diseases, 'much more money has traditionally gone into diseases that affected men.'

In education, she pointed out, though India has made some progress overall, there was a huge gender gap, with 54 per cent of women as illiterate, as against 76 per cent of men. This anomaly, she argued, was hindering the progress of women. 'If we don't have education, our employment opportunities will be restricted.'

There was, Deo said, a consensus of sorts: women's voices on critical issues could best be heard through representation, particularly in the political arena, but in India, the percentage of women in Parliament was around 15 per cent. "So we are not at critical levels of representation to be able to influence the agenda, to be able to introduce legislation of interest to women and children and to be able to ensure that this legislation actually passes - even that this is only the first step, as we know because then you have to make sure that the legislation is in fact implemented.'

It was not all bad, she pointed out: Indian women were lucky that the Constitution gave them the right to vote, from day one; and that it barred discrimination on the basis of gender. In these senses, she said, women had started out as equal to men under the Constitution.

Like AAPI, she said, had to take the lead to promote women's voices on pressing global issues by creating other like-minded organisations at the global, national and local levels.

In the final analysis, she said, the most important task for women was to implement the right to education. 'This is eventually going to transform everything. We must ensure that all girls have the same right to education that is made available to boys.'

In a message to the next generation of women leaders, Deo said "We really must think very, very deeply and with integrity and honesty whether our dreams for our sons and daughters are the same," and went on to underline that how even women, as mothers, tended to have grand dreams for their sons, and scale those dreams down for their daughters. Change, she said, had to start from this aspect.

Dr Khator, who started out by applauding the 'vision of AAPI and the success of physicists of Indian origin in the American mainstream, said she did not need to talk at that forum, about leadership since you all individually are leaders in your own right, and you have no idea how much work you are inspiring me to do now and encouraging me to do even more and more.'

Deo added that some how she came to create history as the first Indian-American woman to be appointed president and chancellor of a major university, she said a subject of glass ceiling existence in the United States.

"Less than 10 per cent of women are presidents of universities total, and there are 4,392 universities and colleges in this country and less than one per cent of those women leaders are Asian.'

Dr Khator, addressing the topic of 'Barriers I Faced as a Woman and an Immigrant,' said the trick, for her, was to always be visible in the belly, and to turn every barrier into an opportunity.

By way of example, she said the fact that she is from India was potentially a big barrier, but it could also be an asset. "I am different, but I am also exotic," she pointed out, saying it made ice-breaking at any mainstream event she attended easy, since there was considerable curiosity in the mainstream. 'Yes, I am different and that could be my barrier, but that could be my asset as well. The important thing is to figure it out, and you can use it as a barrier or you can use it as an asset.'

She said she was aware, going in, that she would have to work '120 per cent to prove herself, because look at me, I am different, I look different, I talk different. I have a different accent, I am international. I mean, how many strikes are there against me?'

It was never easy, she said, detailing various instances where she had not gotten her way. The trick, she said, was not to fall into the trap of feeling victimized. "It takes me probably a day or two [when something bad happens], but then I am over it, I am fine, and I just keep moving and I just let it be. I put my heart and soul in whatever I am doing, I try really not to worry about what is going on next.'

She said she believed firmly in her faith, in her Indian heritage. "I believe if you don't take pride in your own heritage, how can you expect others to take pride in your heritage? But at the same time, you have the responsibility that comes with it and the responsibility is you have to respect their heritage. You have to respect their identity, and their religion.'

She pointed out that different cultures had their own traditions, that governed how people saw you, interacted with you, and it was necessary to understand these templates and work within them. "Basking your observations on her, you are not really sure, she said, "it is different, in America it is different." And then she triggered an explosion of laughter when she waited a beat, and said, "In Texas, it is very different. Texas is a different country altogether.

She said that she was aware of expectations of her were extremely high. "If I make it, I think it will open doors for many other Indian people. However, if I fail, then that could be a little bit of a setback too.'

Opposition leader critiques Indian government at AAPI meet

Partisan Indian politics played itself out at the Association of American Physicians of Indian origin convention with Dr Harsh Vardhan, president of the New Delhi unit of the Opposition Bharatiya Janata Party using his guest of honor speech to slam the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government in India on a variety of counts.

Dr Vardhan, who spoke a day after Indian Health Minister Dr Anbumani Ramadoss' keynote (India Abroad, July 11), complained that despite advances in medicine, "in India today, world class healthcare is available only to a handful of people, I believe any advances in health and medicine which do not lead to a significant change in the health status of the common man are less than meaningless.'

Dr Vardhan, a physician by training and an advisor to the World Health Organization, said the UPA government's 'Health for All' slogan was just words, and that it set a target that was difficult to meet.

"The new paradigm for Health for All approach should focus on all dimensions of health, inclusive of mind, body and soul, and therefore, I appeal to this august gathering of Indian doctors to integrate the ancient great medical wisdom of the past of India and combine it with the modern knowledge of medicine.'

Taking a dig at the UPA's economic policies, Dr Vardhan said that for all the talk of India's economic superpower status and 5 percent GDP, poverty in India was not an abstraction, but a part of life. He cited leading economist and member of India's parliament Dr Aswin Sengupta as reporting that over 80 per cent of Indians live on just Rs 20 ('In your language, about 50 cents) a day.

Unfortunately, the government's obsession is only with double-digit growth, he said, and it should be replaced by a passion for double-digit human development. This is something for which we all have to work together.'

Referring to the BJP's optimism about the next general election, Dr Vardhan said 'I assure you that in the near future, we will have a government, a government including at the center in India, which will be more receptive to the issues of health and of all, of you.'

At this point, Dr Vardhan tossed off figures that were hotly disputed by the attendees. He said, for example, that 38 percent of Indians in the United States are of Indian origin, though AAPI's leadership put that figure at just around 6 per cent.