

Neelam Deo, Renu Khator rock women's forum



AZIZ HANIFFA
in Las Vegas

■ Dr Renu Khator, chancellor and president, Houston University, right, with Neelam Deo, India's Consul General in New York, at AAPI's Women Healthcare Leadership Development session

It was standing room only at the Women's Forum of the 26th annual AAPI convention headlined by Neelam Deo, India's consul general in New York, and Renu Khator, Chancellor and President of the University of Houston headlining.

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 would like equality or we want more representation, it should not be understood as a challenge to men, but as a challenge to women. 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 women'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 fathers, their children.'

She went on to cite the environment, public health, and violence against women among the list of issues of critical concern 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 15 to 24. She said this was 'a consequence 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 counting as literate, as against 76 per cent men. This anomaly, she argued, was hindering the progress of women. 'If we don't have education, our employment opportunities will be circumscribed.'

There was, Deo said, a conundrum 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 — and even that 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. Bodies

like AAPI, she said, had to take the lead to promote women's voices on pressing global issues by connecting with other like-minded organizations 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 physicians 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 being with you, you are inspiring me right now and encouraging me to do even more and more.'

Describing at some length 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 substantial glass ceiling existed in the realm of academics. 'Less than 10 percent of women are presidents of universities total, and there are 4,292 universities and colleges in this country — and less than one percent 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 have fire in the belly, and to turn every barrier into an asset.

By way of example, she said the fact that she is from India was potentially a very 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 when she had not got her due. The trick, she said, was to never 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, and I try really not to think about what is going to come 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 and in you? But at the same time, there is a 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 templates, that governed how people saw you, interacted with you, and it was necessary to understand these templates and work within them. Basing her observations on her own travels, she said 'In Japan, it is different, in Brazil 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 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

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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 pulpit 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 persons. 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 meaningful.'

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 9 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 Arjun Sengupta as reporting that over 80 per cent of India lives on just Rs 20 ('in your language, about 50 cents) a day.

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

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

Early in his speech, Dr Vardhan tossed off figures that were hotly disputed by the attendees. He said, for instance, that 38 percent of all doctors practicing in the United States are of Indian origin, though AAPI's leadership put that figure at just around 6 per cent.