

SPEECH AND DISCUSSION AT THE COMMONWEALTH
PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION

Before I go into any topic, I would like to state the mission of our Tamil Nadu branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA hereafter). The mission of the Tamil Nadu CPA branch is to promote knowledge and education in the social, economic, cultural, constitutional and legislative systems within a parliamentary democratic framework with particular reference to the countries of the common wealth having close historical and parliamentary associations.

India, as you heard from Mr. Andrew Imlach (Director of Communications and Research, CPA Secretariat), is by far the largest constituent of the CPA. India accounts for over sixty percent of CPA's membership. Therefore, India greatly values its CPA membership and has great interest in seeing the CPA succeed. India adheres to many of the Commonwealth principles such as values of democracy, good governance and fundamental freedoms. We believe India has a very important role to play in re-affirming the merits of democracy and functioning as a model state to all the burgeoning democracies around the world.

Addressing Gender Inequality and Empowerment of Women

India, as you all know is the largest thriving democracy in the world. India's democratic system is based on the Westminster model of parliamentary supremacy, where the executive, the legislature and the judiciary all enjoy the exclusive autonomy in their own fields. It is a system of "checks and balances". Based on this premise and within the framework of our constitution, India is evolving a system of inclusive democracy.

You might wonder, what I mean by inclusive democracy. In my opinion, democracy might give the right to participate in the system but not the opportunity. Historically, we had many "so called democracies" which had denied even the right to vote to many groups (e.g. women and minorities). In today's context, although women, minorities and economically and socially backward groups have been granted the right to vote; this historically marginalized group often find it difficult or almost impossible to participate in the system (such as getting elected to office).

India has been in the forefront of women's rights and rights of minorities and socially backward communities (scheduled and backward). India has evolved a system that not only protects these groups but also provides opportunities that were previously unavailable. For example, there is a system of reservation for women, minorities and scheduled and backward communities in education and government jobs. India also has a nineteen percent reservation to the lower house and the legislature for scheduled communities.

India's parliament (under the auspices of the UPA government) is now in the process of passing a bill that aims at eliminating gender inequality and discrimination against women by political empowerment of women. The bill if passed would reserve one-third of the seats in the lower house and the legislative assembly for women. The election of India's first woman president, her Excellency Pratibha Patil (with the support of the UPA government), is a good example of what the future holds for women in politics.

The Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu Dr. Kalaignar Karunanidhi, who is also the vice president of the CPA - Tamil Nadu branch, has been an active proponent and forbearer of social justice in India (in regards to equality of women, minorities, and scheduled and backward communities). He played a

crucial role in the election of her Excellency Pratibha Patil to the office of the President of India. In his effort to further the rights of women and bring the women's reservation bill to fruition, he has organized a conference in Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu, where several lakh women will take.

India and especially Tamil Nadu has been in the forefront of promoting the interest women. Following are some of the schemes that have been by implemented by Tamil Nadu government under the guidance of our Chief Minister Dr. Kalaaignar Karunanidhi for the improvement of women:

- Exclusive appointment of widows and destitute to noon meal centers
- Appointment of women teachers across all categories of educational institutions
- Financial support to pregnant women
- Financial support to brides for marriage expenditure
- Reservation of thirty-three percent of seats in local body elections
- Equal right in properties
- Financial assistance to women self-help groups
- Immediate and strong actions against perpetrators of crimes against women

Many of the aforementioned schemes have been implemented by most of the States in India.

Transparent Governance and the Right to Information

The Right to Information is today recognized at the global level as an essential component of open society, good governance and transparency in public affairs. And many countries have enacted laws and institutionalized several devices to guarantee this right. In fact, global recognition of this right has led to incorporation of the right to information as a constitutional right in many countries.

In the new era, it is information which is the source of power. Information is the life blood that sustains political, social and economic decisions. Power resides in those entities that control the information flow, storage and dissemination. Therefore, in democratic principle, it is essential to ensure that this power does not reside with a select few. By doing so, we will be allowing our countries and communities to travel several decades back in time.

Today, the general public wants to have unhindered access to those decisions that impact their lives. For example, the public would like to know where and how the money collected as taxes is being spent. For their part, those in government have an obligation to make available to the general public their method of functioning and the reasons governing their decisions.

Several countries around the world now make information available to their citizens on a wide range of issues and subjects, save certain exemptions specifically provided for in the law. The bureaucracy has emerged as an all important arm of the government, with its size, departments and its impact on the day to day life of the general public. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure that the bureaucracy is accountable with disclosure of information for public scrutiny.

In the parliamentary system, accountability of the Executive to the Legislature was the only way of ensuring transparency. But the right to information act has now empowered the ordinary citizen to scrutinize the government's decisions. In India, the Right to Information Act was passed by the Parliament in 2005. This has been a landmark event in the history of free India in which public offices functioned under veil secrecy for more than five decades after independence. This Act opened up public records to the public in a real sense and satisfied a long standing demand of the

people, voiced so often from various forums for openness in administration.

The Right to Information act has enriched India's parliamentary system by empowering the people with a right to know how the Government and its various agencies function from the national capital down to village.

Today, every government office has a functionary called the Public Information Officer who is bound by has to provide information, save where it is specifically exempted, within 30 days of asking by the public. Those who do not get information can go in for appeal and the system is firmly in position both at the Centre and in the States.

There is now greater transparency in the functioning of the bureaucracy and government as a whole. However, the society needs literacy to gain full advantage of this right. When people are illiterate, they would not be able to understand sophisticated concepts, much less take full advantage of them. However, this is an important step in imparting political education to the masses whose vote determines the destiny of the nation. The UPA government at the centre and the DMK government at the state have been working to improve the literacy rates, so the right to information and transparency in government can come full circle (in other words, achieve its intended purpose).

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