

**Welcome Speech by Dr. Vijayalakshmy K. Gupta, Member (Finance) / Telecom Commission & Ex. Officio Secretary to Government of India on the occasion of launch of the scheme “Sanchar Shakti” - a Scheme for Mobile VAS and ICT related livelihood skills for Women’s SHGs.**

**7<sup>th</sup> March, 2011**

Her Excellency, the President of India, Smt. Pratibha Devisingh Patil,  
Hon’ble, Minister of Communication & IT, Shri Kapil Sibal,  
Hon’ble, Minister of State for Communication & IT, Shri Gurdas Kamat,  
Hon’ble, Minister of State for Communication & IT, Shri Sachin Pilot,  
Distinguished guests, members of the media and colleagues,  
Ladies & Gentlemen

On behalf of the Department of Telecommunications, Ministry of Communications & IT, it is my privilege to extend a very warm welcome to Her Excellency, the President of India, Smt. Pratibha Devisingh Patil ji, who has very kindly consented to be the Chief Guest on the occasion of the launch of DoT’s “*Sanchar Shakti*,” scheme which aims at the empowerment of rural women. I am overwhelmed at how fortunate we are to have Her Excellency grace our launch function on the eve of International Women’s Day.

Rare is the person who goes out of her way to help the less fortunate among us; rarer still is one who would not speak of the good she has done. Our beloved President is one such exceptional individual. I will not dwell upon the

important political positions she has occupied in a long and successful public career or the various social institutions and organisations that she has set up or the international conferences she has attended as a representative of India on such matters. All of these are well documented. However important these may be, what is more significant is the humane touch she brings to all she does. I just wish to share a particular incident that happened during her tenure as Governor of Rajasthan. Returning from a function she found a group of women desperately trying to evade police restrictions to attract her attention. She got down from her vehicle and met them. Upon discovering that they were war widows who were being victimized, she immediately took up their case and personally ensured justice for each war widow in Rajasthan. She is definitely a politician with a difference and an icon for those of us who wish to reach out to help the under privileged.

The President has in her illustrious political career spanning five decades, constantly championed the cause of empowerment of women and other disadvantaged groups. She keenly supports the women's SHG movement. As time does not permit, I cannot even begin to mention her other contributions in this regard, but I cannot resist mentioning just one. Just as charity begins at home, Her Excellency has supported the initiation of five SHGs within Rashtrapathi Bhavan itself. Named after great women, Mother Teresa, Rani Jhansi, Sarojini Naidu, Indira Gandhi and Kalpana Chawla, these SHGs are engaged in diverse entrepreneurial activities such as recycling paper into useful products, grinding masalas, making compost etc. This is generating economic empowerment and self confidence amongst the women of Rashtrapathi Bhavan. How blessed we are to

have Her Excellency honour us with her presence, at this juncture when we are setting forth to launch a humble initiative for a cause where she has always led the way.

The importance of gender equity and women's wellbeing in development is underscored by the fact that out of eight Millennium Development Goals which are to be achieved 2015, two relate to women. These are, to promote gender equality and empowerment of women and to improve maternal health. India's limited success in this regard can be gauged from our position in the Gender Inequality Index or GII. This index reflects women's disadvantage in three dimensions—reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market. The index shows the loss in human development due to inequality between female and male achievements in these dimensions. It ranges from 0, which indicates perfect equality to 1, which indicates worst inequality in all measured dimensions. India's GII value in 2010 was poor at 0.748 and we rank 122 out of 138 nations<sup>1</sup>. It is common knowledge that rural women fare much worse than their urban counterparts in each of the earlier mentioned indicators. For example whereas overall literacy rate for Indian women is 54%, for rural women it is just 46%.

I sincerely believe that we in the Department of Telecommunications have a powerful tool for women's empowerment in our hands. Information and Communication Technology can overcome barriers of physical distance, language, literacy and socio-cultural taboos and reach out to the more than 350 million rural women in our country who are waiting to contribute and participate as equals in our growth process. In this context, DoT's Universal Service Obligation Fund has

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<sup>1</sup> [http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR\\_2010\\_EN\\_Tables\\_reprint.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2010_EN_Tables_reprint.pdf)

conceived a noteworthy scheme by way of “Sanchar Shakti” which aims at providing ICT related livelihood skills and useful Mobile Value Added Services to Women’s SHGs.

On this auspicious occasion, I take the opportunity to welcome Hon’ble, Union Minister of Communication & IT, Shri Kapil Sibal ji. When I briefed him about this initiative, his unhesitatingly positive and encouraging response filled me and our team at DoT with renewed zest to dedicate ourselves to this programme.

I am also very happy to greet the Union Minister of State for Communication & IT and Home Affairs, Shri Gurdas Kamat ji . He has always been a source of inspiration and guidance for us and he was a pillar of strength as we tried to bring this programme to fruition.

I also extend a warm welcome to the Union Minister of State for Communication & IT, Shri Sachin Pilot ji. I recall how eloquently he spoke about ICT’s potential to bridge the urban-rural divide on the occasion of the fifth World Telecom Development Conference at Hyderabad in May last year. When briefed informally about the *Sanchar Shakti* scheme on that occasion, he evinced a keen interest in the endeavour and immediately offered to support us in every possible way. And he did just that.

We are blessed indeed to have such an inspiring team of leaders.

I would like to express my Department’s happiness at having participants from NABARD, Mobile Service Providers, Application Service Providers, NGOs, Self Help Groups and UN Women with us today. We are particularly honored in that

MS Swaminathan Research Foundation is one of the participants in our mobile VAS projects. Professor Swaminathan could not attend this function on account of the Parliament session but he has conveyed his best wishes to all programme participants.

Last but not the least I also extend a warm welcome to the representatives from Media and Press.

Thank you.