

South Asian Women's Day, 30th November 2009

The region of South Asia is bound by a common thread of history, language, arts and culture. Its concerns are similar too—rising levels of poverty, widening income gaps, greater emphasis on weapons and military, increasing intolerance towards minorities, civil unrest, human rights' violations, and most of all, increasing violence against women. In fact, South Asia is one of the most violent regions for women, as proven by its shockingly low sex-ratios! Besides, democracy covers little ground in the region, while globalisation and privatisation have gained control. In countries that pride themselves as democracies, people have been turned into vote banks, while market forces have turned people into consumers. Boundaries between countries are points of conflict. The result is that our regional identity – as South Asians – has been wiped off our consciousness and we only live as nationals—Indians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans and so on.

To forge in women across South Asia a common identity as South Asians and as women facing similar patriarchy-related concerns, to pledge for peace, justice, human rights and democracy and to celebrate our respective achievements, women from different South Asian countries decided in 2002 to celebrate 30th November as **South Asian Women's Day**.

Sangat, a network of South Asian Network of Feminists, mobilizes activists and civil society organisations every year to come together on the 30th November as part of the International Fortnight against Violence Against Women (25th November—10th December).

2009 has witnessed violent internal conflicts in our countries leading to massive violations of human rights and dignity of women. As concerned South Asians, we would like to pay tribute to the victims of terrorism in Pakistan, the internally displaced persons in Sri Lanka, India and Burma and to the countless victims of armed violence. Our thoughts on this special day will also go to the victims of the food crisis prevailing in the region.

Pakistan has seen a complete break down of its state mechanism and increase levels of violence in the past year. Lack of internal security and increasing armed conflicts have led to insurmountable loss of human life. We the women of the region stand together with our sisters and brothers in Pakistan as they go through this ordeal and pledge our support to peace and disarmament in this region.

The conflict in Sri Lanka has spread from the East to the North. Despite its small size, Sri Lanka currently has the sixth largest internally displaced persons (IDP) population of concern to UNHCR in the world (over 260,000 individuals) as a result of the long-standing conflict, the Tsunami, and the latest round of fighting. There are another approximately 100,000 Sri Lankan refugees living in camps in Tamil Nadu, India. We stand together in the pain, anguish of our friends in this region in particular and throughout South Asia. The loss of family, dear ones and dignity of life is unacceptable to us.

Food security is defined as economic access to food along with food production and food availability. Food security in South Asia is matter of grave concern in the region. South Asia still has the highest number of people (423 millions) living on less than one dollar a day. The region has the highest concentration of undernourished (299 million) and poor people with about 40 per cent of the world's hungry. We the women of this region as the custodian of the earth demand that agricultural practices which have led to indebtedness, destruction of soil productivity and denied farmers their rights be stopped immediately. We believe that through empowerment of women, decentralized farming practices, emphasis on growing food grains over cash crops and use of organic farming we will be able to overcome this challenge.

Peace is a journey which requires strengthening our belief in each other, celebrating the courage of people who have walked this path and embracing their wisdom. The celebration of this day for us is a re-enforcement of the power that the collective voice of the women of south holds. We believe that the people of South Asia can bring peace and prosperity for all through friendship and cooperation. This can be done if we create and strengthen a South Asian identity across borders.

Every year, women of India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Burma and Tibet gather to speak in one firm voice about the need to reinforce democracy, peace, human rights and dialogue in the region. We mark this day every year by listening to the voices of South Asian women about their belief in peace, justice, human rights and democracy. This year, the South Asian Women's Day will focus its attention on envisioning women's solidarity towards a borderless South Asia.

Men and women collect in several cities and towns of South Asia (India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka) to light candles at the same time (between 5.30 p.m. and 6.30 pm.) to express solidarity with the people of the region, and demand democracy and peace. Discussions, poetry, song and dance and so on mark the evening.

Litany for Peace

One: Against words and deeds that provoke discord, prejudice and hatred,
All: We stand together

One: Against suspicions and fears that stand in the way of reconciliation,
All: We stand together

One: Against believing and speaking lies about other peoples or nations,
All: We stand together

One: Against cruel indifference to the cries of the hungry, homeless and violence
All: We stand together

One: Against all that prevents us from fulfilling the promise of peace,
All: We stand together

One: ***Let our friendship heal the*** broken world we pray,
All: together we believe peace can prevail.

One: To still waters and green pastures,
All: Let us walk

One: To the freedom, and forgiveness we find in us,
All: Let us walk

One: To the tough task of loving our enemies,
All: Let us walk

One: To balanced earth, and food security,
All: Let us walk.

One: To the promise of justice, democracy and harmony,
To the wholeness of justice,
To the power o peace,
All: Let us walk together.