**Pragati Event Speech**

First and foremost, I am really happy to see all of you safe and healthy. In the times that we are living currently, that is the most important thing today.

Ambassador Ronde, many thanks for joining us in the programme. Indians think fondly of Finland because of Nokia, which was the first mobile phone most Indians used in their lives. Many Indian techies have worked in Finland and refined their skills in mobile technologies. In fact, all the leading Indian IT companies work in Finland. It is a pleasure to have you on the AIMA platform.

My compliments to AIMA and all the people associated with the Pragati event over the years for doing a great humanitarian job by providing this much-needed platform and forum for recognising the achievements of women, which many-a-times go unnoticed. It is quite appropriate that AIMA has undertaken the task of highlighting the progress of gender parity in work, pay and hierarchy.

Today, women are making India proud in every sector. Be it as a team; for instance, the women scientists from ISRO who were integral in the success of the country’s iconic Mangalyaan mission, or on an individual level; with females like Lieutenant Shivangi Singh, who is all set to become the first woman fighter pilot of India to fly the Rafale combat aircraft- women are walking shoulder-to-shoulder with men in all fields. Over the last few decades, our women workforce has equally contributed towards driving India’s success and upsurge in the global IT space. I think, as a nation, we, currently, are at an inflection point where societal consciousness towards women empowerment is the priority.

At KBL, we have always believed in the spirit of women equality and an all-inclusive work culture. Our successful journey of over 130 years would never have been possible without the invaluable contribution of women. The essence of women empowerment was inherited by my great grand-mother, Smt. Radhabai Kirloskar, right since the early years of establishment of the company over a century ago.

As is said, “Behind every successful man, there is a woman.” – My great grandmother’s life is a testimony to this belief. Her unconditional mental support and encouragement have been integral in my great grandfather, Shri Laxmanrao’s success and stupendous achievements. During the initial days of establishment of the company, when Laxmanrao started making ploughs in a work-shed right next to his house, Radhabai, not content to watch her husband work as a mere spectator, often roped in women from the family and the neighbourhood to help him with the moulding operations. The move to rope in women workforce did not only lent a helping hand to her husband but, more importantly, also created useful employment opportunities for the women residing in the township. Throughout her life, Radhabai took active interest in resolving the issues faced by women. She was instrumental in undertaking many women-oriented activities. She helped set-up a maternity home in the Kirloskarvadi township. Her efforts and contribution in the direction have had a lasting impact in the overall success of KBL and societies around.

The spirit of women empowerment inculcated by my great grandmother was later embraced and bolstered further by my grandmother, Smt. Yamutai Kirloskar. She was an active social worker who worked towards the upliftment of women throughout her life. When she was an advisor of the Maharashtra State Social Board, and the Board President asked her to prepare a scheme to provide aid for destitute women, Yamutai came up with a blue print, out of which was born Mahila Udyog Ltd., an auxiliary production centre for producing engine bearings. She wanted women to become self-reliant and felt a sense of satisfaction when she saw the self-respect and confidence that their job at Mahila Udyog gave them.

Foundation of the Mahila Udyog was just the beginning of our focus on women empowerment. Over the years, KBL has undertaken many crucial women-centric initiatives. We were one of the first companies to have a woman director and a female Vice President for our foundry operations way back in 1990s. However, one of the most significant steps taken by us towards fostering women empowerment in India has been the establishment of our 100% women-operated plant in Coimbatore in 2011. The inception of this plant is a major step taken by the company towards not just empowering women but providing them a valuable opportunity to earn livelihood with dignity and carve their own niche by exceling in an industry and ranks principally dominated by men.

Today, across KBL, many of the significant leadership positions, right from the shop floor operations to the managing directorial role in case of specific processes and departments, are occupied by women. One of our major subsidiaries, Kirloskar Ebara Pumps Limited, is led by my daughter, Rama, who is its managing director and is also among the board of directors of KBL. On the other hand, carrying forward the socialist values of my great grandmother and grandmother, my wife, Pratima, presently leads Vikas Charitable Trust, the CSR arm of our company which is involved in various social and philanthropic activities.

When we talk about the current situation, Covid-19, as rightly mentioned in the programme theme, has put the entire ecosystem into new trajectory. Disruptions like these reiterate why and how a more open, resilient, stable, and inclusive society can withstand such situations better. It has led to exponential changes in the economy, which have created new opportunities and challenges for women. Though the economy is limping back, the systems and structures of work will never be the same again. Business and operation models will change and most organisations would move to a physical-digital hybrid work model. This will demand new competencies and attitudes and also a new deal between the organisation and the employees. This fresh start is an opportunity that women should not miss. With the increasing use of technologies like Robotics, AI, IoT etc. for mechanical work, we can bring more women into labour intensive sectors like manufacturing. At KBL, we already have women workers controlling and managing some of our manufacturing processes with the help of these technologies.

Ever since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, more and more organisations across the world are increasingly accepting and preferring the Work from Home (WFH) option for their employees. This augurs really well for the women workforce, especially working mothers, as we all know how difficult it is for them to leave their kids at home and come to work.

I strongly believe that, in the service sector, it is also very important to provide them an all-round support that would prevent them from leaving their jobs to accommodate to their family priorities. For instance, at our all-women plant in Kaniyur, we run a crèche facility, which takes care of their child-responsibilities while they are at work. Besides, we provide our female employees the option to avail a six-months extended sabbatical leave in addition to the customary six months’ maternity leave in case they need some extra time with their family. Such initiatives can go on a long way in allowing them to continue with their jobs without being stressed-out.

India’s heart lies in the rural sector and empowering rural women, which accounts for a substantial percentage of the population, is very crucial. The section needs more impetus as they may not have much access to a conducive environment for becoming successful. With the right support and encouragement, our rural women entrepreneurs have, time and again, shown what they are capable of. Two of the biggest examples of the same are Amul and Shri Mahila Griha Udyog Lijjat Papad.

As per a recent survey (*Mckinsey*), in India, women’s contribution to the country’s GDP is currently less than 18%, less than half the global average. India ranks 120 among 131 countries in female labour force participation rates (*World Bank Data*) and rates of gender-based violence remain unacceptably high. As per a certain statistical data released in 2019, India presently has only about 27% women in the workforce while the world average is 48% (*Economic Times*).

It is time we realise that it’s hard to develop in an inclusive and sustainable way when half of the population is not fully participating in the economy. [India](http://www.facebook.com/india) can accelerate its growth by encouraging greater economic participation by women. When more women will work, our economy will grow further. We cannot realise the vision of an Atmnirbhar Bharat (or self-reliant India) without the participation of women. Unless the women in our country become Atmnirbhar, India cannot be Atmnirbhar in the real sense of the term.

All said and done, wherever opportunities were given to women, they have excelled and justified their worth. They have the intent and the talent, all they need are the resources to groom that talent and the right platform to showcase it- and the world will be theirs to conquer. Thank you, AIMA for providing them that noble platform and to all the women out there, More Power to You!! Go, Conquer the World!!

Links:

*IMF Report(According to data by World Bank):* [*https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2019/03/womens-entrepreneurship-in-India-mathew.htm*](https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2019/03/womens-entrepreneurship-in-India-mathew.htm)

*World Bank Data:* [*https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/speech/2018/03/17/women-indias-economic-growth*](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/speech/2018/03/17/women-indias-economic-growth)

*McKinsey Report:*

[*https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/07/india-could-boost-its-gdp-by-770-billion-by-just-treating-women-better#:~:text=As%20women's%20contribution%20to%20the,gender%20parity%2C%20the%20report%20said*](https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/07/india-could-boost-its-gdp-by-770-billion-by-just-treating-women-better#:~:text=As%20women's%20contribution%20to%20the,gender%20parity%2C%20the%20report%20said)*.*

*Economic Times:* [*https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/india-needs-to-increase-women-workforce-to-global-average-of-48-in-10-next-years-amitabh-kant/articleshow/70609617.cms?from=mdr*](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/india-needs-to-increase-women-workforce-to-global-average-of-48-in-10-next-years-amitabh-kant/articleshow/70609617.cms?from=mdr)