

Following is the full text of the speech:

“I am delighted to participate virtually in the 29th Yudhvir Memorial Award ceremony and present the award to Dr. Evita Fernandez. My congratulations to her for getting this coveted award in recognition of her long years of dedicated service to the cause of women’s empowerment and healthcare.

Awards and honours bestowed upon individuals not only motivate the awardees to scale greater heights, but also inspire others to emulate them. The tradition of recognizing and rewarding people for their good work has been ingrained in our culture and is an intrinsic part of our ethos.

Late Shri Yudhvirji, in whose name the award is instituted, was a man of many parts. He was a freedom fighter, social worker and a reputed journalist, all rolled into one. Above all, he was a noble individual, a truly exemplary human being. Yudhvirji, I am told, took part in the freedom movement when he was a student and therefore, could not complete his studies. He went to jail several times and suffered torture during the British rule.

I am happy that a Foundation has been set up to commemorate his extraordinary life and achievements. As a torchbearer of truth and honesty, Yudhvirji practiced ethical journalism. He launched Milap Daily first in Urdu and later in the Hindi language in 1950. Over the years he earned the trust and confidence of his readers through fair and impartial reporting. Thanks to his sustained efforts, today the Hindi Milap has evolved into an institution of repute, synonymous with ethical and dispassionate news coverage. It has become integral part of Hindi speaking readers in Hyderabad and southern India. I am told he even launched Milap’s Urdu and English editions from London in 1972 with a view to boost the image of India.

Today’s awardee, Dr. Evita Fernandez, is known for her pioneering work in women’s health and reproduction. She is a strong votary of women’s empowerment and normal birthing. A distinctive feature of her approach which reflects her genuine concern towards her patients, is that Dr. Evita believes in allowing women to make choices about issues concerning birth. It is her firm conviction that women should have a voice in the process of delivering a child and should make an informed choice.

The fact that women comprise 84 percent of the staff in Fernandez Hospitals is a clear illustration of her focus on women’s empowerment. I am told Dr. Evita ensures that women-centric care is provided at all her five hospital units where around 10,000 babies are delivered each year. That in itself mirrors the scale of healthcare operations which she oversees pro-actively.

I am happy to note that Dr. Evita leaves no stone unturned to make childbirth a natural and positive experience for women, promoting normal birth and reducing Caesarean sections. I am told that the Telangana Government and the Fernandez Hospital along with UNICEF are working to reduce Caesarean Sections and increase normal births in public hospitals. This is indeed a laudable objective and more private hospitals must join this drive to reduce C sections.

Dr. Evita’s initiative to create a national cadre of midwives is commendable. I am happy to know that 30 nurses in Karimnagar District Hospital have been imparted midwifery training and that the Fernandez Foundation is committed to train 1500 nurses in midwifery for the Telangana Government.

Improving maternal health care is of crucial importance and so is the need to reduce unnecessary C sections. Every woman and new-born visiting public health facilities should be provided dignified, respectful and quality healthcare at no cost. At no point should we forget India's ancient philosophy of "share and care".

Under-nutrition continues to affect women in India and concerted efforts are needed to address this issue. In recent years, considerable progress has been made in reducing the maternal mortality ratio. With schemes like Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana leading to better maternal health outcomes, we need to accelerate the decline to achieve the target 3.1 of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations that aims to reduce the global maternal mortality ratio by less than 70 per 100,000 live births by 2030.

Undoubtedly, women's health is vital for the overall health of a family. With women comprising about 50 per cent of our population, the health needs of women should be accorded the highest priority. We will not be able to create a healthy society if the health needs of women get neglected. Various health interventions must focus on bolstering and meeting women's health needs since they form the bedrock of a healthy society.

Before concluding, I once again congratulate Dr. Evita for her pathbreaking initiatives in women's healthcare and achieving excellence in her chosen field. She joins the select band of luminaries who are recipients of the Yudhvir Foundation Award.

I am immensely pleased that the Foundation has bestowed the award on people from different walks of life for their outstanding contribution in their chosen discipline.

In conclusion, I thank the Chairman and Trustees of Yudhvir Foundation and the Daily Hindi Milap family for inviting me to deliver this Memorial Lecture.

Jai Hind!"