



*Sustaining Democracy:*  
Challenges in the New Millennium

*President's Address*  
Zarina Bhatti

Xth National Conference of the  
Indian Association for Women's Studies  
17th -20th October 2002

Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, ORISSA

## PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

Zarina Bhatti

Dear Vice Chancellor, Prof. Pandav Nayak, Prof. Hassan, participants from abroad, friends and colleagues. It is my privilege to deliver the President's address to the 10th Biennial Conference of the Indian Association for Women's Studies, the first in this Millennium. This is a time both for reflection and for looking ahead. The future, from where we stand, is beckoning us with mixed messages - pessimistic as well as optimistic. The causes for pessimism cannot be overlooked; instead, there is need to reflect upon them for lessons to be learnt. There is also room for optimism. We must move with positive determination and embark on the path of recreating and innovating, to build a brighter future for all, men, women and children.

The theme of this Conference "Sustaining Democracy: Challenges in the New Millennium" is very apt at this juncture in our country, indeed even globally, when cracks have already begun to emerge in the secular democratic system of governance that free India adopted half a century ago. It is the right time now to fill these cracks before they become too wide and threatening. All of us assembled here, need to put our heads together to face the most important challenge of the ensuing century, that of sustaining democracy and its secular character in our country. In fact, it is now being widely recognised that there is a strong positive relationship between sustaining democratic institutions and achieving sustained development. Not surprisingly therefore the Human Development Report, 2002 has devoted itself to the close relationship between democratic institutions and development. Furthermore it points out, rather ominously, that a decline in democratic standards and sustained development has been observed in several developing countries.

It delights my heart, as one of the first members of the IAWS to see this imposing gathering of concerned women and some men. It also tempts me to

reminisce over how the Association has grown in twenty years of its existence from a humble beginning in 1980 at the S.N.D.T. Women's University in Bombay to this large gathering of committed scholars and activists.

Allow me to retrace briefly the history of IAWS. It is the story of the thinking, the academic vigor and the deep concern for development, in general, and for women in particular. This has brought us so far, and now beckons us to further enhance not only women's own position in society but also their contribution to national development, social, economic, political and ethical. Yes I said ethical too, because I believe that ethical standards, although forever changing, are an essential part of a nation's profile. Two ethical values are basic: equality with dignity for all and freedom - freedom of expression, freedom for an individual's right to choose and, particularly, to follow the faith of her/his choice and, above all, freedom for dissent with an assurance that dissent is respected. These ethical values constitute the foundation of the Indian Constitution. Our feminist scholars and activists, sharing these values, have steadfastly attempted to expose, through research and action; any erosion in the secular foundation of modern Indian society and have sought new paradigms to sustain our foundational values and ideals.

The need for women's studies was first felt when the Status of Women Committee Report was published under the auspices of the newly formed Indian Association of Social Science Research (I.C.S.S.R) in 1975. The Report laid bare the persisting gender inequalities and the grim realities of women's lives on which no impact of the Constitutional rights granted to them was visible. Women continued to lead lives of deprivation and oppression on account of their gender, often aggravated by class, caste and community. A number of studies and research projects were taken up to implement the recommendations of the Status of Women Committee Report. In the light of this, and encouraged by the positive and enthusiastic response of women's scholars and activists at the first women's Conference held in Bombay, such eminent leaders of the women's movement as, Neeraben Desai, Veena Majumdar, Devaki Jain, Madhuriben Shah, Jyoti Trevedi, Hemlata Swarup

and Mr. Shankar Narayan, then Addl Secretary, University Grants Commission and several others, decided to lay the foundation of the Association. Thus was born the Indian Association for Women' Studies.

The Association has proved to be worthy of the trust placed in it. Activists and academics both have enriched each other's domain of activity by collaborating and supporting each other. Feminist scholars have not confined themselves to the ivory tower of secluded learning but, from the beginning, have been a part of the movement, supporting the activists with the findings of their research as well as with their insights into the society and the polity. Likewise activists have enriched the scholars with their empirical data and inspired them with their altruistic enthusiasm. The term 'Action Oriented Research", which has been coined in India, bears witness to this relationship between the two segments of concerned women, who have shared their common objective of sustaining and promoting the advancement of women and society.

Historically the genesis of women's studies rested in gathering more and more information on women's condition, focusing particularly on quantitative data. This made it possible to look at the indicators on birth and mortality rates, sex ratio, extent and nature of women's participation in economic and political life, literacy rates for men and women, levels of educational achievement and health status of women.

The seventies witnessed a shift in the paradigm of development itself. Instead of relying solely on quantitative economic indicators of development, social indicators came to be recognised as crucial in measuring development. As this understanding grew, it posed a methodological problem: what methodology to use and how to make the existing social science methodology relevant. The response to this problem eventually led to a shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare orientation, based primarily on simple quantitative analysis, to one backed with more academic and analytical sophistication. The paradigm shift also caused a change in focus from just women to women in society and, more specifically, their role and contribution to the development of Indian society.

A new brand of feminist academician emerged, one who searched for knowledge about women in society and thought in terms of an integration of gender perspective with other disciplines, be it social sciences, hard sciences, humanities or literature. The Indian Council for Social Science Research established a number of Centres, among them the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) in New Delhi, which has contributed enormously to the understanding of gender in society, and in integrating gender in the system of higher education. At the same time a few other private women's study centers also came into existence, notable among them was the Indian Social Science Trust (ISST) in Delhi, which subsequently opened a branch in Bangalore. Women's Study Unit at the S.N.D.T. University had already been busy conducting research and teaching on women's issues. These and other such institutes have been engaged in developing relevant research methodologies and evaluation techniques, clarifying concepts, developing gender sensitive development indicators as well as new and more relevant analytical tools. In the meanwhile feminist scholars have put pressure on the government to respond to the growing demand for funding feminist research and for incorporating women's studies into the higher education system.

It was a stroke of luck or a benign act of providence that, just at this juncture the University Grants Commission decided to appoint a woman Chairperson of the eminence of Madhuriben Shah., who had been a Vice Chancellor of S.N.D.T. Women's University, Bombay, and had been deeply interested in women's development. It was she who decided, after the very positive experience of the first women's Conference in Bombay, and noticing the enthusiasm of women scholars, to set up Women's Study Centres in Universities and Colleges.

Women's Study Centres (WSCs) were started to promote research - both academic and action oriented - teaching and advocacy. The WSCs have most significantly contributed to starting a dialogue in multi-discipline collaboration which, among other gains, has surfaced related concerns of methodology and, at the same time, has created a space for women's

studies vis-à-vis other disciplines within the system of higher education. IAWS has been instrumental in establishing networks between WSCs and other private research centers outside the University system. Regional workshops and biennial conferences of the IAWS have focussed on relevant gender issues and provided a platform for academics and activists from all four corners of the country to come and share their scholarship and experiences. Due to the opportunity thus made available, a great deal of information has been generated, which has helped the establishment of a number of Documentation Centres in the country. Conferences, such as this one, as well as workshops, have initiated dialogues between scholars in different disciplines which, in turn, has led to multi-disciplinary collaboration in the structuring of gender as an area of study. However, given the rigidity of the University system, the introduction of courses on gender, at the undergraduate and graduate levels is proving a difficult task. There is little scope for innovation within the system and attaining a faculty status for women's studies in the system of higher education still seems a long way off. Paucity of financial resources, heavy teaching load in colleges, tedious and time-consuming procedures have impeded progress in this direction.

Another reason for non-acceptance of women's studies as a full-fledged discipline is that it does not open up new job opportunities while existing employment opportunities are limited both within and outside the University system. Since the nature of women's studies is essentially multi-disciplinary, their relationship to other more rigidly defined disciplines is vague and has caused social scientists to be disinclined to own women's studies their discipline.

Despite these constraints women's studies have been gaining ground and while they have not gathered enough mass to be accepted as a separate discipline, their inter-disciplinary character is receiving more and more acceptance and a gender perspective is being incorporated in courses and syllabi in a number of Universities. There does exist, however, a body of opinion that questions the need for regarding women's studies as a separate discipline and wonders whether gendering disciplines will not serve the same

purpose. Further debate on this issue is needed, though personally I feel that it is not an either/or question because the processes of gendering disciplines and of building a separate discipline can be pursued simultaneously.

As is well known the greatest challenge in India is poverty and socio-economic disparities. Developmental efforts to narrow the gap between the rich and the poor, between men and women have not been particularly successful. On the contrary, poverty has come to be increasingly feminised and the emerging economic and socio-cultural challenges have affected women adversely. Economic forces of globalisation are further complicating the situation by imposing a uniform coca cola culture. These are hidden forces which are restricting choices and creating a consumer oriented culture dictated by aggressive advertising with the sole purpose of maximising profit for a few. Introduction of new technology, opening of the Indian economy to multi-nationals, communication invasion, increasing access to information and the rise in consumerism are all leading to a heightened sense of deprivation in the socially and economically disadvantaged classes. Simultaneously, a growing awareness of basic human rights is creating counter-productive tensions, especially in a situation where the Government is unable to handle them. As always happens, tensions, bred by rapid socio-economic changes and crisis situations, lead to deterioration in women's condition, particularly in the case of poor women.

The emerging new brand of fundamentalism, both in the majority and the minority community, is promoting religion-based identities and separatism, destroying thereby the familiar and accepted notion of nationhood in India. These forces in the majority community are trying to impose majoritarianism by invoking ancient traditions and culture, and with the help of a partisan interpretation, attempting to imbue it with moral justification. Because to link patriotism to the past it is necessary to glorify the past, an attempt is being made not only to reinterpret history but even to invent it. Minorities are expected to derive their patriotism from loyalty to the glorious past and if this loyalty is not visible in a credible manner, their patriotism is questioned.

These self-styled protectors of Indian culture are negating the notion of 'unity in diversity' which for long has been the hall mark of Indian civilisation. India has absorbed in the past a variety of races, religions and cultures. A tolerant and open door attitude to a multiplicity of cultures and the availability of multiple cultural choices has been the most enriching factor of our composite culture. The variety of races, faces, languages, dresses, architectural styles, cuisine, music that has decorated the Indian cultural landscape has been unique in the world. And it is this uniqueness that is under siege today.

Conceptualisation of the Indian civilisation by the fundamentalists has given women a central position. But, while Indian womanhood has been perceived differently at different junctures in Indian history, the recent rhetoric of revivalism requires her to uphold the ancient virtues of modesty, chastity and sacrifice. Hence the imposition of dress code on women and the disfiguring of young women's faces if they dare ignore the dictates of the fundamentalists. In this context women and women's movement has a dual role to play. In the first instance, women must resist to be co-opted by the fundamentalist forces that are trying to lure them in the name of religion and secondly, they must expose these disruptive forces and safeguard our cherished goal of secularism and democracy. Therefore, we, as a body of academics, also need to clarify the concepts of secularism, democracy and nationhood.

The issues that feminist scholars have taken up in the last twenty years cover a wide range. Feminist scholarship is no more confined to the collection of data and its analysis, for it now ventures into probing gender in human thought processes. In doing so it is developing a gender perspective, which is adding a new dimension to the understanding of human relationships in the existing power structures of family, economy and polity. For example, new approaches to the study of history are not only making women visible in history but are also recording the social processes that have historically affected women's life and status. These new approaches to the study of history are particularly relevant at this juncture in India when some motivated people are trying to rewrite the past to counter the forces of secularism and

modernity. Romila Thapar, through her study of Kalidas' classic Shakuntala shows, how the construction of the past can be influenced by the needs of the prevailing ideologies, and how the present selects items from the past to legitimise the prevailing political and ideological vested interests.

Similarly, feminist economists are redefining 'work' and 'employment' and introducing new methodologies for their measurement. Traditionally only that employment is considered qualified for economic measurement which involves productive work, whether for wages or for own family business. Long hours spent in domestic chores and rearing children by women, is not included in either category of employment. Some work done by women for family business, such as, caring for cattle and kitchen gardening for growing vegetables for self consumption, though productive is often ignored or inaccurately measured. Feminist economists have made a valuable contribution by critiquing the methodological inadequacies of data collection, particularly with reference to the unorganised sector which accounts for 90% of women's participation in productive work. Feminist economists are currently engaged in locating gender in the new era of economic reforms involving privatisation and globalisation.

Another significant area of feminist scholarship relates to research on the institution of family in India. Indians perceive themselves as highly family oriented and regard woman to be pivotal in maintaining the family integrity as a doting wife, serving daughter-in-law and sacrificing mother. Feminist scholars have devoted considerable time in unveiling gender inequalities and oppressive relationships within the family, relating to property rights of women, female sexuality, reproductive rights and the role of female labour in sustaining families.

In the next decade or two, feminist scholarship can make valuable contributions by raising questions like: what has been the role of Women's Study Centres since their inception and how effectively have they been able to forge a feminist perspective in teaching and research in Universities. Further, what curriculum changes have they managed to affect; what space

have they succeeded in negotiating for women's issues in the system of higher education; and how and where new locations for women's studies have emerged. Addressing such questions will not only enrich feminist scholarship but also scholarship in general. They will also provide support to the feminist movement for bargaining a better deal for women in family and society.

On the activist's front, a struggle for women's political and legal rights has been a major issue. Women's movement has been quite successful in getting a better deal for women and has persuaded the government to take legal and policy measures to empower women and improve their status .

Government's response to feminist pressures has been a mixed one. In respect to legislative measures to safeguard women's rights in the family and society the Government of India has been forthcoming. A number of laws have been enacted starting with the Hindu Code Bill, granting equality, or rather near equality, in personal and familial spheres because a number of loop holes still exist, to the 73rd and 74th Amendments providing 33% reservation to women in Panchayati Raj institutions. Similar legislation for the representation of women at higher levels of decision making bodies such as the Parliament and State Legislatures is however resisted tooth and nail.

In order to reduce women's poverty and other economic hardships faced by them, a host of schemes, such as, Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Indira Rozgar Yojana, Women's Self- help Groups, Women's Employment Programmes, etc. have been initiated. But the manner and extent of implementation has left much to be desired, mainly on account of cultural attitudes of the implementers and the lack of accountability in the system.

Special needs of the more disadvantaged women working in the unorganised sector of the economy were recognised and a National Commission of Self Employed Women was set up in 1988. The Commission gave a comprehensive account of the condition of women workers in the sector and made a number of recommendations to improve their lot, none of which have been addressed for implementation until now.

The National Education Policy was revised in 1991 and reiterated that women's education was a critical input for development . Despite this proclamation women continue to lag behind men not only with regard to literacy but at all levels of formal education, particularly higher education and courses in modern technology, engineering, etc. Instead of removing these gender based educational disparities, the present Government has been devoting its attention and resources to politicising education and thereby stifling scholarship and academic freedom. To meet its political end history is being rewritten with a distinct communal bias, glorifying ancient Indian culture and interpreting it to the detriment of women's status by eulogising her role within the household and highlighting the virtues of virginity, purity, sacrifice and submission.

A National Commission as well as State Commissions for Women have also been instituted to fulfil a watchdog role for safe guarding women's rights and enhancing gender equality. So far these Commissions have proved ineffective in fulfilling their mandate, mainly due to the pressure of political vested interests.

A National Policy on Women (NPW) has now been formulated which lays down the policies and approaches to be adopted by the Central and State Governments for women's development and gender equality. But the NPW lacks teeth, it has neither made budgetary allocations nor worked out an implementation machinery. While theoretically including almost everything under the sun concerning women's status it has neglected to strategies a system of accountability for non-compliance to the policy.

Similarly a National Policy on Health also exists, yet figures for women's mortality and morbidity are rather depressing. Sex ratio according to the latest Census (2001) continues to be adverse, 933 women to 1000 men. Particularly disturbing is the growing incidence of female feticide, so clearly reflected by the sharper decline in the sex ratio in the age group zero to six years. Crime against women is also on the increase and prostitution of girl children has increased manifold. Most of these regressive trends can be traced to the

patriarchal mind set and gender discriminatory attitudes. Women's movement in India will have to address the above factors in coming years.

Women's movement has also been divided on some political and legal issues relating to women, in particular on the issue of Women's Reservation Bill and uniform civil code. No doubt that a uniform civil code will stifle, to a large extent, cultural diversity and will undermine the rights of the minorities, yet there is a need for changes in some iniquitous and oppressive personal laws operating among the minorities. Feminist scholars and activists have been hesitant in addressing the issues of minority women and hence studies on minority women and in multi-culturalism are few and far between.

On the conceptual level secular feminists have found themselves in a dilemma as to how they should assimilate minority women's issues into the agenda of broader feminist issues and, at the same time, safeguard their religious and cultural identity. This dilemma has been somewhat aggravated by the rise of fundamentalism in both the minority and the majority community, and the periodic outbursts of communal conflicts have further hardened religio-cultural identities. The pursuit of secularism in India has erroneously taken the path of political interference in protecting all religions, instead of neutralising religion in so far as politics is concerned. Consequently religious identities have sharpened and diverted the attention from the realities of minority women, specially Muslim women, which are not very different from those faced by other women of the same class and region. Inquiry into issues arising in this area can fruitfully add to knowledge and also throw light on the complexity ridden field of attaining a harmonious relationship with minorities in the plural society of India.

I am happy to note that this Conference will deal with some of these issues and will, particularly, deliberate on the rise of fundamentalism and communalism and the violence associated with this phenomenon that is eroding the very foundation of our secular democracy. Communal violence, which blatantly showed its most ugly face in Gujarat only a few months ago, has caused deep concern among the feminists which is being addressed

through scheduling a special session on the communal violence in Gujarat in this Conference. The object is to examine the causes of the kind of hatred and brutalities observed in Gujarat and to probe into factors that could help build an environment of trust and solidarity between communities. The concern for solidarity and amity, based on the common resolve for establishing and sustaining a peaceful secular democratic society, is not limited only to India, but extends to the entire South Asian region which is confronting similar forces of fundamentalism and religious bigotry that are threatening peace and development in India. I hope that the South Asia panel on Peace and Women, scheduled in this Conference, will provide a positive feminist perspective to the understanding of conflict, war, nuclearisation and violence in the region. Indian feminists, together with South Asian participants, will work out strategies to counter these threats, and provide a vision for building just and peaceful societies in South Asia, that accommodate diversities and respect for divergent religions and cultures.

I cannot do better than to quote from the farewell speech of our former President Dr K.R.Narayan who called "tolerance, the soul of our culture and tradition" and stated that it was this precious tradition that "made India's unity creditable and enduring". Similar sentiments were reiterated by the new President of India, Dr.A.P.J. Kalam, who emphatically expressed his "unflinching commitment to secularism" and called secularism the "cornerstone of our nationhood." Let us also make a pledge to defend unflinchingly the cause of a secular democracy in India and Asia - the greatest challenge of this millennium - with all the wisdom, energy and advocacy skills that we possess. Thank you.

Dr. Zarina Bhaty

17, Zakir Bagh, Okhla Road, New Delhi 110 025

E'mail : HYPERLINK <mailto:bhaty@nde.vsnl.net.in> [bhaty@nde.vsnl.net.in](mailto:bhaty@nde.vsnl.net.in)