

## **IInd National Conference, 1984: Thiruvanthapuram**

*Address of the President*

### **Madhuri R Shah**

The Association has completed two years of its life, and I am happy that it is beginning to take roots in our academic and national life. A membership of 21 institutions and 271 individuals, a record of two major conferences, some forthcoming publications, and some reserve funds, (instead of an account in the red) these are all signs of healthy growth. While I am happy to acknowledge the recognition and support that we have received from several international agencies, the fact that our activities have received support from our national agencies responsible for promotion of social research, development of higher education and for policies for women's development is, to me, an even stronger indication that the Association is fulfilling a national need. We have made a good beginning and should congratulate ourselves for that, but we should not become complacent. A great deal still remains to be done if the objectives which we set before ourselves at the First National Conference in Bombay four years ago are to be realised fully.

As you are aware, I was the Chairman of the Organising Committee of the First National Conference. I was then Vice-Chancellor of SNTD Women's University, and had tried to initiate some work in Women's Studies through our Research Unit. When Vina Mazumdar and Hemlata Swarup met me, I think it was in December 1980, we discussed how we could organise a more broad based movement to develop women's studies within the general educational system. In the standard method adopted by Indian academics wanting to do new things, we thought of organising a Conference.

We did not even know how many people in the country would be interested and initially expected only about 100 participants. We also thought that it was necessary to call persons engaged in action for women's equality and development, to make that base even stronger and more nationally relevant. We then invited some other people to join a National Organising Committee and set about writing letters. Most of you are aware of the response. In place of the 100 that we had anticipated, nearly 400 attended that Conference, and before it ended they had resolved unanimously that an Association must be formed to sustain this effort. The Organising Committee was entrusted with the responsibility of bringing the body into existence. It took us a little time but, I hope we have fulfilled the responsibility that was entrusted to us.

In my Opening Address to the First National Conference, I had asked the participants to think about possible ways of incorporating Women's Studies within the educational system. Some of the Working groups did very good work and came back with recommendations. By that time I had become the Chairman of the UGC, and I was very interested that virtually all the working groups had rejected the model of separate courses for women's studies, and had asked for its incorporation within the major disciplines of Humanities and Social Sciences. A year later at a workshop sponsored by the UNESCO in Delhi, the same plea was put forward by some of our members.

Following these recommendations, the UGC addressed a letter to the Universities in 1983, suggesting that Universities incorporate women's issues and concerns within different disciplines through restructuring of courses, curriculum development, research activities and extension type of work.

The UGC has received some proposals in response, which are being examined by the Secretariat. From what I have seen of them so far, very few have attempted the restructuring of courses or curriculum development. Most of them have sent research proposals, a few have asked to set up Centres or Institutes for women's studies. The proposals also give evidence that the universities have not really viewed this issue either as a need to take note of new knowledge, or as a responsibility for playing a more direct role in promoting women's equality and development. To that extent I have to confess that I am disappointed by the universities' response.

I think in the coming years, this is the most important challenge facing the Association. The primary role of a movement is to articulate issues that have been neglected or marginalised and to mobilise public opinion in support of measures that would not only redress the existing injustice, but initiate a process to prevent such injustice in future. Women's Studies, in my opinion, has emerged as a powerful challenge – (a) to the existing marginal position of women in society, and (b) to the intellectual perceptions of the most dominant section of our people, which includes both men and women, that contribute to perpetuate the marginal role of women. The UNESCO workshop defined Women's Studies as an instrument for developing the social sciences. I would like to see it as an instrument to develop our entire educational system and all the disciplines, not merely the social sciences, but also humanities, the natural sciences and professional disciplines like agriculture, medicine, technology, law etc. I have therefore, pleaded with the Government that this should be incorporated within the New Educational Policy that is currently under preparation.

Even if we were to succeed in getting the government to agree to this, it will still be necessary for all of us – members of this Association – to work out ways of operationalising this objective within educational institutions. After all the universities are autonomous institutions and unless the academic community itself takes this up as a challenge necessary for the nation's overall development, we are not going to make much head-way.

The task before the members of this Association is a challenging one. The more active we are in opening this dialogue with our own institutions, the more successful will be our effort. I am delighted that a few of our universities and colleges have already enrolled as members of this Association. I would hope that they will bepace setters in this venture. But in the long run educational institutions depend on the values, the convictions and the work of their members – teachers, students, and administrators. We, as members of this Association, have to pick up the challenge of converting these three groups to our point of view. I hope the members and the new Executive Committee will devise better and more effective methods to achieve this objective.

Thank you,