

**IIIrd National Conference, 1986: Chandigarh**  
*Opening Address by the Vice-President*

**Leela Dube**

The formation of Indian Association for women's studies is truly an achievement. It has been able to bring together various groups, individuals from different professions and engaged in different activities and a variety of institutions and organisations.

This university has hosted several professional conferences and we are grateful that it has agreed to host our conference. At the same time, it will not be out of place to point out that our Association is different from other professional organisations in both composition and objectives. The participants here include not only academics and regular professionals but also social workers, activists, writers, lawyers, doctors, para medical personnel, political workers, grassroot workers, women struggling for their rights of grass roots level, persons working for women's welfare within the government, women working in the informal sectors and in various organisations. These are not exactly disparate categories. Not only that, many participants here combine in them several interests, activities and positions; all of us have one common concern: women's issues and gender relations and a firm commitment to change for the better. Thus, while Women's Studies has been accepted as a legitimate area of enquiry in the universities and research institutions, this association is not confined only to academic pursuit. Let me repeat: we are deeply committed to change, to using knowledge for action.

We have a realisation that in social sciences, language and common sense, understanding, there has been a strong androcentric bias. Women's contribution as actors in various fields throughout history and as subjects of social processes who constitute, reproduce and modify social systems defined by relations of power have been ignored; they have either been invisible or have had distorted visibility. Their voices remained silent or unheard. This studies focused on women (though not ignoring men) in various disciplines, evolution of earlier studies and taking up new researches with a new consciousness constitute an important objective for us. We also strive for incorporating new findings in the mainstream social sciences and other subjects. However, significance and urgency of issues and themes selected for investigation do not justify shoddy research, hastily planned and casually executed. Beware that in the scholarly world, Women's Studies is often viewed either with hostility or with contempt and condescension. We have to prove our worth and the seriousness of our endeavour. Objectivity for us is not value-neutrality. The choice of subjects is guided by the need for struggle and improvement of conditions, while in actual research bias has to be avoided and proper methods are tried to be followed. Even biases have to be known biases.

The nature of our field often demands interdisciplinary collaboration and co-operation. However, care has to be taken that in the absence of a firm grounding in one's own discipline the quality of work is not diluted. It is indeed a happy sign that we have persons who, while well equipped with the skills and knowledge of their own discipline are eager to listen to people from other disciplines and there are also examples of studies – projects – involving people from many

areas and disciplines. Further, efforts towards innovation of appropriate methodology have already begun.

To assume that being a woman automatically qualifies a woman to understand and capture the experiences of diverse groups of women is to practise self-deception and to resort to a kind of essentialism. We must realise our limitations and complex human diversity. A special effort is therefore required to develop understanding, empathy and insights. Further, it is alright to emphasise the study of problems of poor women, but is it enough? Some attention to middle class women (i.e. to one's own class) is equally important. Often, the conditions and nature of their limitations and disabilities and oppression remain unclear to them; their strategies are often based on notions of femininity and masculinity, ideal motherhood, and the lower worth of their own lives. There is an urgent need for consciousness-raising regarding gender disparities among both women (of all categories) and men.

For this reason, it becomes an issue as to whether women's studies should be strictly confined to women or should involve men also. Being a woman does not automatically qualify a woman to understand women's issues. And certainly gender issues are not only women's issues. At the same time, many of my colleagues strongly feel that care must be taken that with a distinct advantage of better opportunities for acquiring knowledge, skills and positions of status and power, men do not usurp the field or make it bereft of social concern which is the hallmark of Gender Studies. Another point that is made is about giving women who have a fetching voice opportunities to be vocal and express themselves without constraints.

A careful scrutiny of feminist writings from the west is called for. Blind acceptance must be avoided. There is some sense in emphasizing the importance and value of the involvement of indigenous researchers and local workers in women's issues and Gender Studies. Undoubtedly many subtle aspects of gender relations and contextuality of meaning are often difficult to grasp; so also categories of thought and nuances of behaviour. Here I may also emphasize the need for awareness of cultural diversity within our country linked to class, caste, community, region, rural-urban divide and so on. This applies to both academics and activists.

This brings me to an important, critical issue: prejudices harboured by activists and academics against one another. In point of fact, there needs to be no confrontation between the two. Women's collective action requires a sound understanding of social reality, of people, beliefs and the logic of their behaviour. Perhaps concerned academics can provide this knowledge and requisite information if they do not confine themselves to weaving theoretical webs. Activists value, role and contribution must not be minimised at any cost. Resistance and protest as well as constructive activity and consciousness raising without adequate grasp of social reality may result in taking faulty steps, faulty planning and action and may also result in incorrect post action analysis. Academics and activists can surely learn from one another. Rather than confrontation, co-operation should be our objective. And, we also have among us a number of persons and groups who combine research and activism. Another area for genuine co-operation or at times even merging is action research. Value of commonsense as well as genuine concern and capacity to mobilize and inspire women to action must not be undervalued. Let me repeat: resistance movements and remedial action both require a sound understanding of the culture in which the subjects are located. And this can come from both directions, academic, well-planned

studies and use of commonsense, direct contacts and observation, with a capacity to reach the people.

Those of us who had taken an initiative to establish the Indian Association for Women's Studies sincerely wish that the younger generation should now come forward and please keep in mind that take over. But we are still active, and will continue to work for pursuing the objectives of the Association.

Thank you.