

Vth National Conference, Jadavpur (Kolkatta): 1991
Presidential Address

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On The Way to Gender Justice: A Decade of Trial And Achievements

It is a happy coincidence that the Fifth National Conference on Women's Studies organised by the Indian Association for Women's Studies is being held in Calcutta at the Jadavpur University, following the tri-centenary celebration of this great city.

In retrospect, the city can boast of political, social and cultural achievements and upheavals. However, as far as the Association is concerned, this occasion and time gain greater significance as Bengal has produced strong women who have excelled in diverse fields giving lead to the women of India. On such an occasion, one cannot but help remembering these great women. To name just a few – Sarojini Naidu, Sarla Devi Choudharani, Taru Datta, Basanti Devi – the list can go on...

Members of my Executive Committee and I are grateful to Jadavpur University for agreeing to host such a large conference which is being attended by representatives from all over India and a few neighbouring countries. On behalf of IAWS I add my welcome to all the delegates and distinguished guests.

The Association is fortunate in having Ms. Qurratulain Hyder a renowned literary scholar and Gnanpeeth awardee to inaugurate to Conference. Her contribution to the cause is through her writings on women and we consider it an honour to have a woman with us of whom we are all proud. We are also grateful to Prof. Sen, Vice-Chancellor of the host University for joining us and being so supportive to the cause.

Since the Association conceived in 1981 has completed 10 years of contribution to women's studies, for my Presidential Address, I have selected the theme : "on the way to gender justice: A decade of trial and achievements". A decade, you will agree, is a special event to take stock.

Till date, four National Conferences have been organised by IAWS, touching issues and concerns relevant to women at that point of time.

Taking a kaleidoscopic review, the first and memorable conference on women's studies was held in Bombay at SNDT University in 1981. This set the pace for the movement by giving a broad focus to Women's Studies in India to review it as a critical instrument to improve our knowledge about society. It also led to the birth of the Indian Association for Women's Studies to provide a forum for interaction amongst individuals, institutions and organisations involved in teaching, research and action for women's development and promoting women's equality through periodic conferences, specific action programmes, dissemination of information and so on.

From among active pioneers, I should say founder contributors of the Association – Leela Dube, Hemlata Swarup, Neera Desai, Vina Mazumdar, Lotika Sarkar, Lucy Jacob, Bina Roy, Devaki Jain, Phulrenu Ghua and many others – I am happy to see some of them with us to-day. This continuity of association has given added strength to the Association. I was also a party to the First National Conference.

This first convention was followed by three national conferences at Trivandrum in 1984, Chandigarh in 1986 and in Waltair in 1988 and now the current one at Calcutta. By a coincidence, the Conferences have circled the country.

You are aware, in each of the Conferences, we have focussed on a particular broad theme interlinked by sub-themes through workshops to give maximum opportunity to participants to voice their concerns, experiences and perceptions. The past and present themes of biennial gatherings indicate the effort that the Association has made in organising sessions on current and pertinent themes. The First Conference being the initial gathering discussed a wide range of issues concerning women. The Second Conference primarily focussed on women and law, political participation and work, the Third on women's movements and struggles, while the fourth Conference concentrated on one issue with multifarious dimensions, such as rural women, poverty, survival and struggle. The current conference is on religion, culture and politics.

I am sure all will agree to the relevance of the theme in the present context. The way in which three facets of society, namely, religion, culture and politics are intertwined, ultimately affecting women in adverse manner is being proved by the events not only in our country but through developments occurring at global level. The ugly face of fundamentalism goes against the norm of equality and is an assault on women's freedom and identity, I need not repeat before this enlightened gathering the tragedy of the Roop Kanwars and Shah Banos. Unfortunately, even progressive legislation has not been able to blunt the edges. Fundamentalism which corrodes the fabric of society by promoting reactionary values and practices could only be combatted by conscious efforts at awareness generation and resistance to actions of retrograde measures in the name of protecting religion or maintaining cultural identity. Further, fundamentalism operates quite often in a more subtle and covert manner. Hence, women have to be on guard, all the time, so that the precious achievements which we have made so far though still in a limited manner are not wiped off. It is necessary to build unity in groups of women of different religions for collective action to achieve social and economic justice for women. This is an area in which the Association should give leadership through the spread of secular approach and I am confident the recommendations which will emerge will pave the way for the same.

On this occasion, a retrospective review giving highlights of the contributions of the women's studies movement and role of IAWS will not be out of place.

What began 10 years back as an awareness generation activity bringing together academics, activists and researchers to develop and sustain women's studies, today has a different picture to project. The deliberations, dialogues and networking during the decade have grown wider in range as well as deeper. The beginning of women's studies was made with research, documentation and action. Today we have also encompassed the area of teaching where focus is largely on inter-disciplinary approach and integration of women's issues in the disciplines.

Currently nearly 50 Women's Studies units have been operating in the Universities and about the same number of organisations outside the University system are concerned with academic and other issues for implementing Women's Studies. More and more material on women's position, problems, perceptions, movements, and other aspects is committed to cater to the growing need. In the Eighth Plan the spread is bound to increase.

When SNTU set up the programme in 1974, pioneering in this field, it did not have advantage of experience or convention or a model to go by. The paradigm was interpreted and established as the Centre progressed and fresh dimensions were added. In the contemporary scene, the newer centres are in a way in a more advantageous position having a broad frame to go by with possibilities of experimentation of focussing on specific aspects. Take the illustration of Jadavpur University. Since it has a school structure, the focus is on interdisciplinary aspects, drawing strength from various disciplines.

Women's Studies, which started as an exercise to make women analyse deeply the complexities of the status of women in the changing social pattern, today is an academic exercise where people from different disciplines contribute making it an interdisciplinary area and an act of transformation through close liaisoning with action. The decade has witnessed debates on concepts and theoretical issues touching feminism, definition of work, role of family, analysis of women's movements, and many others, orienting knowledge to be useful to changing society. In recent times women's studies is touching new parameters. The National Workshop on 'Visibility of Women in Statistics and Indicators' held at SNTU University in 1989 by the University Research Centre for Women's Studies jointly with the Department of Women and Child Development, Government of India and International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), made participants conscious of the quality of information available and needed for fuller development of women in national policies and plans. As a consequence of the dialogues that ensued between different organisations, for the first time, the 1991 census operation will probe gender issues and quantify the work in homes and agricultural fields. This is a significant gain as it will improve the visibility of women in national statistics. It is indeed gratifying that after so much struggle and determination, gender dimension has been added in the national census.

I am happy to mention that today IAWS has been able to acquire a status as an important body representing women's interest, where its opinion and reactions are now valued by policy makers. In fact, this process was started by the Association through its President, Dr. Madhuri Shah, who as Chairperson of the apex body of higher education, the University Grants Commission, initiated women's studies at the UGC in 1985, responding to the developments occurring inside and outside the system. This has been a very major contribution. Thereafter, office-bearers and members of the Association have actively participated in the various debates concerning women at governmental and non-governmental levels.

Very recently, the Association collaborated with academic institutions and non-governmental organisations deliberating on the various clauses of the National Commission on Women Bill, 1990 and made recommendations to remove the anomalies which were considered, with recommendations from other organisations and individuals at the National Conference convened by the Department of Women and Child Development in the Ministry of Welfare. This

Department has also built links with Women's Studies centres, seeking information for assigning research projects the latest being the national project. "The Girl Child and the Family" involving nearly 25 Women's Studies departments. Women's Studies scholars, several of them belonging of IAWS are included in policy recommendation bodies, to illustrate, the National Commission for Self-Employed Women, Joint Parliamentary Committee on Special Marriage Act, National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribe Women and others. That too is a positive step of achievement. Further, IAWS from the beginning has been maintaining links with international women's movements and has collaborated in conferences, panels and workshops focussed on feminist issues. This contribution gains significance on the conceptual front.

The IAWS was started with certain commitments. The conference deliberations have focussed on conceptual tasks and research orientation. New dimensions are added. I am hopeful that the same dedication to the objectives of the Association will continue. Moreover, in the present times when career is the goal of life and consumerism is a way of life, Women's Studies researchers and activists will need to provide a new model of approach and understanding.

As mentioned earlier, today's Conference is coinciding with the 10th year of the IAWS. To commemorate the decade, the Association has brought out a Special Issue tracing its development and touching selected facets related to women's studies. I am confident this occasion and the document will act not only as a historical reference when future milestones of the Association are being celebrated but will be considered a cutting point to retrospect and move forward to enrich further the activities of this national forum.

A galaxy of women – academics, researchers, activists and policy makers has contributed to the building up of the IAWS. Some of them have been pillars of strength; many have supported the cause. All categories of persons are needed for a crusade to be meaningful, relevant and effective. It is a very difficult task to identify the contributors by name as many would be missed; but on this occasion of the decade, the Association records its appreciation and gratitude to all those who have in one way or the other, helped the Association further its 'career path'.

The words sung by Poetess Jogeshwari in 19th Century Bengal became a common saying depicting typical male attitude and patriarchal values. They were: 'The boat, the horse and the women belong to whoever rides them'. Women's solidarity programmes have brought us a long way; but we have 'many promises to keep ... and miles and miles to go' and it is only through concerted action, vigilance and joint effort that we will be able to 'strengthen our strengths'. Differences will be there; this only reflects our maturity. Women's Studies have faced difficulties and will be facing further constraints; in spite of this situation, we have to take up new challenges and give a new scope to the activities through collective deliberations, collective thinking, collective action and above all collective commitment. Let this be our clarion call.

During my tenure as president of IAWS between 1989-1991, I have received excellent support from members of the Executive Committee and we have worked closely and cohesively. Whenever I have approached friends, colleagues and the family of SNTD – RCWS they have been with me in this challenge. I value this support. Finally my very sincere appreciation for the work put in by Dr. Jasodhara Bagchi and her supporting team of dedicated faculty, staff and

friends for looking after the most difficult facet of the Conference – the ‘nuts and bolts’ aspects through wonderful managerial skills.

I look forward, with all of you to an exciting debate on the various issues of the theme.

Dhonnobad Jai Hind