

VII National Conference, 1995: Jaipur
Welcome Address by the President

Neera Desai

Honourable Guests, Fellow Delegates and Colleagues,

I deem it a matter of great honour and privilege to offer a warm welcome to you all to the Seventh National Conference of the Indian Association of Women's Studies. As all of you must have noticed the Conference is being organized differently. Any new step brings with it some adjustment problems. But there is a thrill in treading new paths. I therefore urge upon you to bear with some of the inconveniences you might have faced. Kindly look at the Conference as a joint venture and not as a 'we' and they' relationship. We are here to join hands in building a new vision of better society for both men and women.

We are meeting at a very critical moment in the development of Women's movement not only for Jaipur but also for the entire country. We are meeting at the time when one of the cruelest injustices has been perpetrated on a committed ardent activist Bhanvari Bai-under the guise of moralistic overtones and in the name of Indian Culture. It is not merely the fact of acquittal of the four alleged rapists but the manner in which the court arrived at the decision which reminds us of the days of Mathura Case nearly two decades ago. The blatant contention that in India society a woman cannot be raped in the presence of her husband or by the upper caste men fully expose the patriarchal, class-caste bias of the Judiciary. In fact the Judgement has come as a grave signal to us that the women's issues will have to be taken back from the government to the people. Bhanvari is here amidst us and I believe the least we can do is to assure her of all our support in her struggle.

My presentation to day is not in the conventional manner of a President's speech; we have a full agenda where we would more like to hear the voices of women and listen to the address of our chief guest Dr. Vandna Shiva. I wish to briefly refer to some of the developments in the macro-system which have posed serious problems to all those involved in the movement. Through this exercise I wish to suggest that our search for visions is likely to be seemingly frustrating if we seek them in the conventional spheres. The glimpse of Feminist vision may not be articulated but may be hidden in the practices and alternate models we create and new ethic which we build up.

The period between the Mysore Conference and the present one has been full of dramatic events. The past president Devki Jain and the Guest speaker in the last conference referred to the enormous state the country was running into through the introduction of New Economic Policy, market as the sole determinant of the value of the products and globalization with its concomitant devastating impact on the life and behaviour of the people. During the last two years the condition has worsened. No amount of assurances about improvement in the economic situation by the Finance Minister or some of the academics can hide the stark reality of growing poverty, unemployment and destitution. Sulabha Brahme while describing the policy as anti-people, recently expressed her anxiety by stating that women across all strata of society will be the worst hit by the process of economic liberalization that is being zealously pursued by the

Government (TIO, 15 DEC, 1995). Similarly there is an alarming note coming from academics and social activists that increase of women's employment in the unorganized sector is a 'distress sale of female labour.'

The last couple of years have witnessed series of international meetings, consultations and conferences. They created an impression of debating seriously on vital issues affecting people at large, however in terms of action agenda and commitment they are extremely disappointing. The International Conference on Population and Development at Cairo where 184 Nations met and agreed on 20 year programme of action which in the final analysis throws the burden on third world countries for coming out of the crisis is one glaring instance of imperialist attitude.

Soon after this the heads of 184 Nations met for the UN world Summit for Social Development in March 1995. They met to agree on a set of principles to alleviate poverty, generate employment and promise social integration. The condition of people is becoming worse day by day. It has been mentioned that one out of every five people in the world-more than a billion in all live below poverty line, an estimated 13 million die every year of poverty related causes. The picture becomes darker when it is predicted that the number of those affected by extreme poverty will quadruple in one life time if the current economic and demographic trends continue. Of course all these realities were outside the scope of the Summit. There has been hardly any commitment to action. The NGO forum as it is well known had difficulties of its own with the result that the few activities and academics withdrew from the mainstream discussions and joined hands with the People's Movement.

Beijing Conference is very fresh in our memory. It was a momentous meeting of over 30,000 Women NGOs. In spite of media's silence, trivialization and quite often negative projection of the NGO deliberations, the Beijing conference has a few pay offs. It reinforced the conviction in the incessant struggles which will have to be launched against all forms of violence. The open letter of Thanks written by Asian Women's Human Rights Council and Vimochana mentions, 'We the women who came here from diverse lands and cultures write to tell you we are saying NO to all forms of violence in our societies-be it the violence born out of our own cultures not only brings women from diverse cultures together but also voices the unease about the 'stridency' and 'appropriation' or the ignorance on the part of the 'First World' where gender, race and class issues in other parts of the globe is concerned. (HUMANSCAPE) The Beijing conference has been one more evidence of the hollow and opportunistic approach to women's issues by the policy makers. The country paper which was supposed to have been jointly prepared in consultation with the social activists and academics has been seriously criticised by the women's for the non-committal stand and portrayal of the bright picture of the women's condition in the country. As mentioned in the publication of Joint Women's Programme entitled 'Towards Beijing A Perspective from the Indian Women's Movement' 'The Paper (Country) appropriates the language of the movement while diluting its concerns.' (p.2) The wide spread feeling of distrust in the country paper subsequently led to organization of series of meetings before finalizing it. How far the changes and thrusts recommended by the women's groups will be incorporated and implemented is doubtful. The National Commission of Women established in 1990 generated a mixed reaction in the beginning about its role. However it seems to be identifying a few thrust areas for action. Strengthening of Women's Participation in the decision making structures in order to safeguard the interests of women and provide national level

scrutiny and advocacy for policies if adequately followed may be able to make the Commission play the role of support institution for women's movement.

The intervening period had been witness to the strengths and tensions, rifts and differences in the Women's Movement. The time has come to accept the fact that women's movement is not a homogenous movement; feminism is not a monolithic ideology; it could have pluralistic visions and strategies. The diversities reflected in values, in analysis of socio-political scenario, in manifestations of patriarchal attitudes need to be recognised. However the commonness of concerns or commonalities of oppressive realities can not be ignored. We have to be ready to accept differences in approach and evaluations of situation provided the goal is common.

The resistance to oppression through grassroots movements has been one of the notable features of the period. In fact we have moved from the 'culture of silence' to culture of articulation and protests. The anti-arrack movement against displacement of the tribals in Eastern Bihar, movement against the Bargi dam, Narmada and so many others are a few evidences of raised voices against the havoc wrought by construction of large dams, acquisition of land, deforestation and other such policies. These measures have been hitting hard the poor people but they have far more adverse impact on the life of women and children and make them more vulnerable. The struggles undoubtedly indicate the newly gained confidence of women and their strength in resisting such formidable forces as the state, vested interests and the muscle power.

Similarly, the euphoria about the judiciary delivering justice to women has been again and again eroded. The holding of Public Hearing on Crimes against Women and the Violence of Development organised at Bangalore illustrate one such effort not merely to try the guilty but it also provided a non inhibitive atmosphere to women to give expression to the gravity of violence and indignities which they have been made to suffer. The public hearings of such accounts are not only the techniques to break the silence of centuries of acceptance of oppression but are occasions to meet out justice to them. When the established structures fail to deliver the goods parallel structures need to emerge to punish the guilty.

The scenario in the women's studies is rather baffling. Women's studies (WS) began as an alternate movement for knowledge production and knowledge dissemination. WS is not merely a subject to be studied in the class room. It attempts to understand the problems of women from a feminist perspective; it is also an instrument to change the conditions of women. The UGC by establishing centres in some of the Universities by the various departments. To day there are about 22 centres of WS in various universities and in the 9th plan some more are likely to emerge. It is necessary to note that Feminist scholarship is not only confined to the centres but the activity of knowledge production is carried on outside the Centres also. Naturally the problems of administration, dealings with other departments or answerability affect the centres more directly. Further the Centres are quite often bothered by the administrative responsibilities, getting financial support for their activities, dealing with the UGC bureaucracy and evolving strategies to survive. They find their tasks too formidable and time consuming. This situation very often comes in way of seriously making dent on the educational system through WS. Today we have a peculiar situation where knowledge is produced considerably outside the centres but for some of these scholars getting acceptance from the mainstream academic community has high value. While there are a few centres which have been struggling to carve

out a balance between theory and praxis, as usual there are a few who consider WS as a status giving discipline, providing opportunities of access to power and position; for them serious concern with the women's issues is of less significance. With the new wind blowing in the UGC it is hoped that we will have more centres with greater degree of permanence and above all more concern for developing knowledge from the feminist perspective and disseminating it not only to the academic community but making it relevant for mass of women. We have to remind ourselves constantly that when we started the movement for WS in the educational system it was not for adding one more discipline to the repertoire of disciplines. We did not plead for development of mere esoteric knowledge. We thought that it is an instrument of change. It was an effort to bring relevance to the educational process.

The scenario is also fraught with a new challenge before all of us, whether in the movement or in the studies. That challenge is the need to shake off the value free garb and be ready to take positions. The impinging of human rights is becoming a normal phenomenon. There are ecological infringements, fundamentalism is promoted through various means; instances of state violence also are increasing; there have been atrocities perpetrated on Harijan and tribal women; the uniform civil code has become a serious controversial issue. There is an urgent need to demonstrate commitment to democratic values by the policy makers, NGOs, women's groups and women's studies academics. It is in this context that commitment conference organized prior to the Beijing Conference has relevance. Concerned women are not satisfied merely with promises given by the government but they need to have assurance that they will be implemented. All of us are tired of pious policy statements which turn out to be either platitudes or instruments for political gain. The world public hearing at Hurairou was aimed at speaking out' their unresolved historical grief and asked every body to grieve with them. Together they pieced together fragments of a precious collective memory. Together they dare to dream-a dreamscape.'

Thus while reviewing the situation during the last half a decade one finds that newer challenges are facing the women's movement and women's studies. There have been formidable forces leading quite often to frustration and pessimism. The women's movement along with other people's movement is becoming alert to the hollow statements of policy measures. With increase in violence and risk to the survival of human kind we notice a deep silence about the new visions for a better society. Visionary or utopian articulations are possible when there is some remote chance of realizing them or there is some possibility of having a better life. With the growing deprivation, erosion of ethical values, resurrection of fundamentalism and survival risks increasing the individual is exhausted in the day to day struggle with hardly any hope left for dreaming a better future. The tiredness of building utopian visions does not simply reflect a passing phase of pessimism but relates to some of the basic changes in the social system having serious impact on the people's lives and the psyche. These conditions compel one to question oneself and also to seek answers in alternate paradigms of knowledge and social behaviour. When we talk of feminist vision perhaps we may not find it expressed in clear terms. We have to locate it in the alternate structuring of organizations; in alternate ethical practices that might have been evolved; in the alternate method of sustaining relationships that might have been built up. In the introduction to the Conference theme we have referred to the pleas made by the environment and green movement for better and sustainable society; The revival of Gandhian values and the decentralised economic structure has been another alternative which seems to

appeal a few. The women's movement dreams of a society which would be bereft of class and gender discriminations and where woman's dignity will be respected for its own value and not as an appendage to any other individual.

We hope that the four days we will be spending together will strengthen our endeavours for searching newer paradigms, to involve in struggles to preserve the human species and to build for a better future – may be not for us to see but for the future generation. A big thank you to all.