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Presidential address

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The year 1999 was one of some very serious losses for the women's studies movement in India. Within the last five months we lost Prof. Asok Mitra, Prof. B. Shivaramayya and Prof. M.N. Srinivas. Many of the young participants may wonder why I should begin with this statement. I do so to emphasise their role as symbols of success, in the impact of women's studies on the academic and social conscience of three very senior scholars, of three different backgrounds. Asok Mitra played a major role by chairing the ICSSR's Committee on Women's Studies in the post-Emergency period and pushing a few of us into exercises in policy formulation in which we had no experience. He was also a founder of the Association for Women's Studies and in his own field, population studies, he tried to instil a gender sensitive comscience among his students and colleagues by using the declining sex ratio as a kind of a whip. Shivaramayya went on to become a gentle, but persuasive activist in highlighting the critical importance of gender issues permeating legal studies. Srinivas, while pushing the ICSSR's programme into the study of 'invisible' women i.e. women whose life experiences had remained invisible to social scientists till then, helped to strengthen the perspective and focus that enabled him years later, to acknowledge women's studies as the 'most significant development in Indian social sciences' and also as a 'challenge from below'.

This kind of open support from very senior and leading scholars from three distinct fields in the formative period of women's studies in India was a characteristic feature which provoked occasional envy among colleagues in other countries, and sometimes questioning by feminists within. Did it demonstrate a sign of our dependence on the patriarchal establishments?

Our generation did not think so. There were also some very senior members of the governmental establishment who were equally disturbed by the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India and became allies of our movement from the beginning. Whatever efforts were stirred up within the government to modify, change or look for alternative policies would never have taken place without the help of these insiders.

I used to refer to this generation as the freedom generation i.e. of persons who were already full adults at the time of, or a decade before independence, I believed that some of them had accepted the value of gender equality - at least at the intellectual level, and their acts of omission or commission were not worse than those of us - women in professions - academic, administrative, or political. The Constitutional promise of equality had foundered because no body including women activists, was aware of its greatest obstacle - *the social construction of gender*. Being academics ourselves, we identified the education system - **influenced as it was by social hierarchy and colonial influence - as a major culprit for directing the content of education very far away from the lives of the majority of women - thereby rendering them invisible. If the social construction of gender was to reflect Indian social reality in all its diversity and promote the values propagated by the new Constitution then the education system had to be made aware of its positive potential as well as misdeeds.**

The first National Conference on Women's Studies brought together various sections of the Indian middle class - government functionaries, voluntary organisations, trade unions. political activists, and other sections in civil society 'to initiate the long overdue process of incorporating women's roles and experience in academic studies' by promoting a pressure group of academics and activists, government functionaries and university representatives, women's organisations and trade unions, specialists and generalists from different sections of society.

Running through the massive list of 19 working group reports, desperately seeking to make concrete recommendations, was **'a rather nebulous idea that what was necessary was a *transformation* of structures, of ethos, of quality and behaviour through the unity of scientific studies, mobilsing action, and spreading awareness - among the public, within educational, health and legal systems, among the media and the worlds of creative literature, science and technology. It is this underlying idea that made participants feel that they were taking part in a *movement* and not just a conference – and the decision to form the Association for Women's Studies to maintain the momentum.**

That Conference focussed on a broad range of public **policies 'as they affect women and their roles in society'.** This time we are discussing women's *perspectives* on public policy. So the movement – to a considerable extent – **the creation of that 'happening' nineteen years ago, has *moved in strength and ideology - from the politics of recommendations to the politics of assertion and participation.*** I would call this an exercise in political responsibility in a democracy. But in the current jargon of human rights – this is part of the Right to Development.

In the decade after the Emergency, some of us working in cooperation with like-minded officials within the government produced both critiques and alternatives to existing policies with very little or no result. In the mid-80s however, while the women's movement suffered a severe defeat over the Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill, **the Women's Studies movement scored its success in getting Education for Women's Equality incorporated in to the new National Policy on Education.** It was to take us several years to realise that getting a policy, like getting a legislative amendment, was not enough to ensure its implementation. I would however like to mention that the national goal of equality was retained within the NPE only because of this intervention, Government policy otherwise was very busy eroding the concept of equality from the education system at that point. The Chapter was forced to mention minorities, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes having made space for women's equality as part of a new thrust.

What I am trying to emphasise through these old stories is that **in the eyes of the political establishment at least, women's studies came to acquire a political identity as well as an ideology which challenged the statusquo and vested interests, in academia and society at large – at the theoretical/philosophical – or the purpose, value or content, as well as at the operational, organisational or structural levels.**

I am not too sure how many new entrants into women's studies understood or accepted this tag at that point of time. I would however claim that *the genesis of the identity and ideology can be traced to the collective articulation of concerns at the first National Conference itself and in the selection of themes in successive National Conferences.*

The political context within which women's studies in India was born and nursed through its infancy and adolescence is however very different today. In the last three successive conferences – we tried to address the realities and implications of gloablisation as a process affecting the lives of every citizen of this country, but women in particular, with increasing inequalities or negative trends at various levels. But the *situation we face today presents a clear threat to the survival of women's studies as an organised movement.*

The dream of education being the greatest catalyst for creating a new nation, a new society, and new rights for the people as a whole - including all those groups which had been excluded from any notion of rights - to equality, justice or dignity in our inherited past - looks like an illusion that cannot even qualify to be recognised as a mirage in the context of today. Within education itself, higher education is in a state of acute crisis -where academic freedom, university autonomy, or the pursuit of knowledge are all being regarded as dispendable - in the search for the highest bidder in a rapidly changing auction market. As far as the school system is concerned, particularly in the area of social studies - the whole series of recent reports in the press are enough indications of what is being planned. Women's Studies has been involved in reconstructing the past to remove the barriers of invisibility and suppression of accounts of women's agency, but the process of deconstruction of history that from reports has already reached a fairly advanced stage makes it imperative for women's studies to reexamine and redefine its role and strategies in future.

Any struggle or movement has to respond to major changes in the broader environment if it wants to survive. It calls for vigilance, broad-based participation and organisational strength. **Above all it needs allies in all groups who stand to lose their dreams for a future in a world and a nation threatened by too many destructive forces and sharpening inequalities.** It is not for me to advise you of how you should deal with these challenges. All I can say is that my life, like that of some others here was enriched and extended by the explosion of creative energy at various levels, but particularly at the grassroots unleashed by the twin movements by women in this country. In that creativity, energy and confidence I shall stake my beliefs for the future.