

## Welcome Address

*Vasanth Kannabiran*

Respected guests and delegates to the conference:

As I look around at the bright familiar faces that fill this distinguished gathering the line that comes to mind is one from the Pancharatna Kriti. "Endaro Mahanubhavulu Undaga Andariki Vandanamulu" on behalf of Asmita. We salute the great ones gathered here.

This moment is one that is poignant and precious to me. I feel deeply honoured to stand here before you and welcome you to the historic city of Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh, to Andhra where you as the IAWS have been before and to Telangana where you have not. And each of these places, each a part and yet not a part of the other, the ease and dis-ease with which these identities divide, connect and oppress us mirror our fragmented realities and selves in India today.

We began with readings from *We Were Making History* because history was made here. Once by the women whose words you just heard and again by the very process of documenting that great history. The history of struggle which aspired to build a nava samajam. A vision which inspires us with awe just as its failure fills us with despair. A story of that vision which is read with reverence across the world even today. The questions raised then have grown sharper in their relevance and many of those lines you heard are poignant echoes from the past that reverberate the reality of women in struggle even today.

And so in bringing you here to this place where history, memory, struggle and scholarship converge we hope to add richness and depth to your deliberations.

I welcome you to a city that has a history of diversity, a city that has prided itself on its culture and its literature. I welcome you to the land of Ailamma, of Sarojini Naidu, of Jeelani Bano.

I welcome you to a city that has achieved fame for its hi-tech achievements and for the thoroughness with which it is modernizing on the fast track. A paradise for foreign investors, a blue eyed baby for the World Bank. A cyber city where flyovers, fast cars and high-rise apartments madly race each other to scar the skyline and obscure the contours of this ancient plateau. As women we know that paradises are mirages built on the hunger, deprivation and marginalisation of large sections of people in this region. We have famine, epidemics of encephalitis and malaria, epidemics of suicides and unending violence behind the glass and chromium exterior of the megacity of the future. To this shining land, torn, blood stained and hungry, I welcome you.

Since the VIII Conference we have seen a war that has ravaged our economy. And a flood that has devastated an already suffering people. And we have realised yet again our inability to deal with relief and suffering promptly and efficiently. Those of us who wept when Babri Masjid was demolished fearing the demolition of our secular polity have experienced the meaning of impotence and paralysis when church after church has been razed to the ground and nuns and missionaries raped and killed.

We meet in an environment that is dense with visions. Grand visions of development, visions of wealth, visions of greed, visions of revolution and liberation. And small ones of peace, of hope, of equality and security. Let us then pick up our sickles, the constant companion of the peasant women of this plateau and weed out the false visions and the fraudulent, weed out the empty rhetoric and clear the tired earth for the seeds of our shared hopes and aspirations.

We meet in a new millennium. We meet at a moment when the future seems bleak and yet we meet to bend our minds to the task of building a new society. Or to quote the women who were making history, where men and women will be equal. Where it will not be necessary to impose a death penalty for rape. Where it will no longer be necessary to kill for pleasure or punishment. A sane society. A peaceful society.

We meet to search for ways to influence and write policy in a way that it takes account of women. We seek to institutionalise the gains of our praxis. To set up the mechanisms by which women's rights and women's interests will have the priority that they require. If there is something on which we in the Women's Movement can pride ourselves it is our energy and intelligence, our capacity to both absorb and withstand criticism, our ability to rise above our many differences when something vital is at stake. We have come a long way in the last two decades. I wish for all of us that we use that knowledge and experience during these four days to forge a path into the new millennium. I welcome you once again. Wishing you success in your deliberations.

Thank you for your patience.