

34th Conference of the Indian Anthropological Society

Inaugural Address

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My colleague Narayan Banerjee had informed me that my task at this meeting was to give a key note address. I find now that my role has been changed to that of inaugurator of this Conference. When I received your message, I wondered why I was being invited to play this role. I am not an anthropologist, so the only possible reason could be your selection of the theme 'Women's Empowerment' for this conference, as I have been involved for the last 25 years with women's studies and the women's movement in India. I must also explain that I am not here in the capacity of Chairperson of the Centre for Women's Development Studies but because of my connection with these two movements.

Before the Meeting started, I found out that the founder of this Society was the late Prof. Nirmal Kumar Bose. I met him the first time in 1960 at a seminar in Patna, and recognised him as a possible 'guru'. I went and asked him that I wanted to work for my Ph.D under his guidance. When he questioned why a person teaching political science in Patna University, wanted to work under his guidance, I had answered that I really could not accept the boundaries of any discipline. Since I wanted to work on India, but had not decided what to work on, I felt that he could show me the path. Though this did not work out eventually I had the good fortune to get to know him much better when he was Commissioner of Scheduled Castes and Tribes in the late 60s, and I was an Officer in the UGC. Over the next few years, I learnt a great deal from him. Once he told me "If you want to know this country, your journeys by air or train will not help you - you have to walk to get an experience of the real Bharat". By the time I got a real chance for Bharat Darshan while working with the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Prof. Bose was no longer around. I cannot say if I lived upto his ideal of Bharat Darshan - but the conversations with thousands of women across the country - **who had remained 'invisible' to Indian social scientists at large, including myself**, reminded me all the time of that basic lesson that I had received from him. It has also increased my confidence to address this gathering - since he was the Founder of this Society - with some questions. If some of them sound somewhat harsh, I hope that all of you will take such harshness in the same spirit that I recognised in Nirmal Babu - the eternal seeker for truth through social science.

My first question to the Anthropological Society is why in the year 2001 did it select 'Empowerment of Women' as its Conference theme? Is it because this year has been declared as the Year of Women's Empowerment? The United Nations had declared 1975-85 as the International Women's Decade. Did your Society focus any of your

previous conferences on issues facing women? Just before the Decade began the Committee on the Status of Women in India submitted its Report to the Government of India. To the best of my knowledge, copies did reach the Anthropological Survey of India. Many of the ASI's later publications included more information on women of the particular communities that they studied. The Anthropological Atlas published by the Peoples of India project of the ASI even included certain maps showing perceptions of women's status in different regions. I have always wanted to ask about the methodology that Anthropologists used in determining this **perception?** I distinctly remember that there was a marked difference in the **self-perception and other's perception** that was sharply marked in the case of some of the North Eastern States. Who was this 'self', and the others'?

I also had the good fortune to assist Prof. Leela Dube to organise a series of Sessions on Women and Development at the 10th World Congress of Anthropology in Delhi (1978), when she became the Chairperson of the IUAES' Commission on Women. Prof. Dube's Commission collaborated with the Indian Association for Women's Studies to organise an International Conference on Women and the Household, again in Delhi in 1984, when I was General Secretary of the Indian Association for Women's Studies.

Women of this country have an expectation from the students of Anthropology - those who teach it, those who undertake research, those who are in public service, involved in planning, implementation of development projects, and advising the government on policies and programmes, particularly for the socio-economically deprived and exploited groups. Needless to say all such groups include a large number of women. The CWDS has been working with peasant women's organisations in Bankura, Purulia, and Medinipur for the last two decades. But the Anthropological Society of India with its headquarters at Calcutta - has never, to the best of my knowledge, concerned itself with either the objectives of women's studies in India or that of the CWDS' activities in West Bengal. **Why therefore this interest in emerging issues of empowerment of women today?**

My second question is how do you define 'empowerment', and what do you feel. You, as Anthropologists, can do to empower women? **Which women?** I ask these questions because I had to face a lot of frustration through the last two decades. **25 years ago I used to say with great confidence that whether other members of Indian society respond or not, the social science community of India will respond, to the CSWI's questions, and devastating conclusions.** That confidence was based on two real life experiences.

I. Firstly my 16 years experience as a University teacher, and seven years as an officer in the UGC Secretariat. Through all this period, neither my colleagues, (senior or junior) nor my students ever made me feel that I was not their equal or was unwelcome. In 1976 one feminist anthropologist from the United States had asked me why I did not demonstrate any lack of confidence while arguing gender issues in the presence of male academics? Apparently for her and her generation, people like Lotika Sarkar and myself were exceptions to the rule - or the anthropological image of the subdued, subjugated Indian women. Another one wrote a book on Indian women in which she described us as **'Daughter's of Independence'** i.e. both of us were adults at the time of

Independence. After the CSWI, we started describing ourselves as 'the first generation beneficiaries of the equality clauses of the Constitution.

II. The CSWI's investigation depended on the following major sources: (a) available research on women/communities/regional cultures/laws/customs,/ occupations/roles, status etc. :- undertaken by social scientists of many disciplines; (b) demographic trends revealed by the Census, NSS' and other major official surveys/studies on education, health, employment, political participation etc.; (c) extensive discussions with over 10,000 women from different classes, backgrounds, regions, visibility or its opposite; and (d) certain pointed, hurriedly done comparative studies which we commissioned in the last year when I became Member Secretary of the Committee, **to test out some of the dominant established hypothesis regarding women held in different social science disciplines as well as other members of the Indian educated elites in government, law, health, education, media, politics, planners, and other sectors of our complex society.** To commission such studies at a very short notice I had to depend on my friends and students in the social sciences (all of them men!) who responded to my SOS messages, even while protesting against undertaking such critical exercises within such short time. This was possible because of my long experience within academia.

The Conclusions that the CSWI arrived at was based on this pool of information. It was very painful to discover how ignorant we, the daughters of independence had been about the realities of life experience, perceptions and trends of change in the conditions of the overwhelming majority of Indian women. **We also discovered how many myths about our own society each of us had accepted as truth as a result of the education that we had received.** I would like to inform you of an **anthropological discovery** that we made through the assistance of Leela Dube, who was our colleague on the Committee. All of us had been brought up to believe that **Hindu society did not traditionally permit divorce or widow remarriage**, and how much social opprobrium reformers like Vidyasagar had to face to legitimise widow remarriage. On my request, Leela Dube prepared a table with data from the 1931 census, ticking off the population in the Hindu castes, which did not traditionally permit these two practices. **We ended up with a figure of 13.5% of the then Hindu population.** When I asked her whether it would be all right for me to write that this could be calculated as less than 10% of the total population at that time, she agreed. Demolishing this particular myths gave us a lot of satisfaction but **I regret to say that the majority of our educated intelligentsia today continues to believe in this myth like the other great myth - that the majority of Indian women down their history have always been primarily house-wives, and dependent on the men of the family for their own and their children's survival.**

It was to combat these myths that the late Prof. J.P. Naik, then Member Secretary, ICSSR, helped me to launch the Women's Studies Programme during the dark days of the Emergency. Ten years later, when the Rajiv Gandhi Government announced its decision to formulate a new National Policy on Education, we, in women's studies mounted a lot of pressure on the Government to incorporate a few paragraphs on **Education for Women's Equality as a national mandate for all educational institutions "to play a positive interventionist role for the empowerment of women"**. That is the first use ever made by the Government of India in an official policy

document (Parliamentary Resolution on National Policy on Education, 1986; reiterated with a revised Programme of Action, 1992).

Just two weeks ago I was invited to speak on Women and Higher Education in an orientation programme conducted by the Delhi University, for teachers who have put in four to five years teaching already. About 40 out of 50 of these teachers were women - a recent change which has been taken note of by some of the main officials of the University. **Not one of the 50 was aware of the National Policy on Education, or what role higher educational institutions, and their members, were expected to play vis-à-vis women.**

It has now become a generalised practice among the intelligentsia and the media to blame the dysfunctionality, indiscipline, or corruption of our elective bodies, never themselves. **Who is responsible for this communication gap between policy pronouncement made by the highest legislative body at the national level and persons within the educational system who are supposed to implement them?** Here I have to fall back on quoting another *guru* of mine - Prof. D.S. Kothari, Chairman of the Indian Education Commission (1964-66) - **about 'the special role of Indian universities' in making a success of India's democratic experiment by "acting as the conscience of the nation"**, assessing the nature of problems emerging in society as a result of the various processes of change - fearlessly to provide warning signals for necessary remedial measures.

Another reason for my tremendous confidence in the response from social scientists was the impact of our report on some very senior social scientists like Prof. B.N. Ganguly, Asok Mitra, J.P. Naik, M.N. Srinivas, Justice Krishna Iyer, Prof. Raj Krishna, V.M. Sirsikar, Iqbal Narain, Upendra Baxi, Amartya Sen, A.R. Desai and many others. Prof. Ganguly told Raj Krishna (when the latter became Member, Planning Commission) "You and I, and others of our ilk, we economists, have contributed to the process of marginalisation of women's role in the economy, because government has been framing its policies on the basis of our analysis. Now we must undo that damage". Asok Mitra's massive analysis of 100 years of Census data (India's Population : Aspects of Quality and Control) posed some major issues and questions in its section on Status of Women. Krishna Iyer distributed copies of the summary of the CSWI's Report (published by the ICSSR, 1975) to his fellow Judges and went on to evolve the concept of **Gender Justice**, without which the basic objectives of the Indian Constitution would remain hollow and meaningless. Srinivas, invited as the first Asian scholar to deliver the Thomas Huxley Memorial Lecture in the Royal Institute of Anthropology, London, in 1977 introduced **immurement of women** i.e. expanding controls and restrictions on women's freedoms as an essential feature of upward social within India's hierarchical society - which has to be fought by women focussed studies. In 1986, inaugurating the World Conference on Sociology in Delhi, he described women's studies as **'the most significant development in Indian social sciences in the last two decades - a challenge from below'**. If I were to ask you why did Srinivas view it as a challenge from below, will you answer? If I ask why the new phase of the women's movement turned to the women who had remained most invisible to the academic community as well as political organisations in search of new perspectives, new priorities, and its own identity, will I get an answer?

I am a student of History and taught Political Science in my role as a teacher. I learnt from sociologists about **role conflict** which prevents gender equality and found the theory responsible for strengthening the myths - but not applicable to the majority of Indian women – the poor labouring women in rural or urban areas . History has remained guilty of failing to record women's contributions/roles in different periods. Anthropologists, on the other hand have worked mainly among communities at the grassroots, the non-literate, peasant and tribal communities. How many of you have ever thought it necessary to talk to women in these groups - **to find out what they think about their social, economic or political conditions today, or the extent to which they have noted changes between earlier and current generations** - their mothers or grandmothers, themselves and their daughters?

Now my last question - how do you propose to identify issues of women's empowerment? Is there a need for empowerment? If so, who is supposed to bring that about. Thanks to the present phase of globalisation, we keep hearing about various formulae for **good governance** from the World Bank and the IMF. Some of those formulae also contained the words 'empowerment of women'. I hope you are not going to draw on those formulae for your inspiration. The Human Development Reports of the United Nations have thrown up literacy, life expectancy and mortality as the major indicators of human development or of people's quality of life. In spite of many efforts on the part of some of us - the **HDRs refused to include sex-ratio within its indicators**. In 1990, however, Richard Jolly's report on 'This World's Women' used the sex-ratio for the first time, and also included workforce participation. In 1995 the HDR decided to focus on gender and introduced certain concepts as 'gender development indicators' (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Indicators (GEM). While they did make an effort to estimate the value of women's unpaid work, which included all the **caring functions** that they performed within the households or as voluntary workers, **there was still a reluctance to examine the the sex ratio and its variations across age groups/regions/cultures as a significant tool to examine the impact of macro economic transformation, social change and population dynamics**.

The provisional results of the 2001 Census have only confirmed what we in women's studies have been pointing out since the early 1980s, that three decades of **brain washing on the population problem has distorted the social and ethical values of India's educated middle class and endangered the girl child in India as a species facing extinction**. A few months back the Supreme Court expressed “grave concern” at the failure of the set of laws (national and state) to control female foeticide as well as female infanticide. These were all laws enacted under pressure from the women's movement. But when reproductive technology advances to introduce pre-conception sex selection, these laws become inoperative. We were warned about this new technology a decade earlier by a group of socially concerned doctors in Bombay. Those young doctors found little response either among the community of social or medical scientists; the only exception was the women's movement. The President of the All India Association of Gynaecologists and Obstetricians - (a woman), was reported to have said in her Presidential Address to the Association that the **first national responsibility of her profession was to arrest population growth**.

Satish Agnihotri, a young IAS Officer - an environmental engineer by training, utilised theories and patterns of social behaviour thrown up by the Indian Census and social

science research in India to complete a study on the juvenile sex ratio (Patterns of Sex Ratio in India, Sage, 2000) which concludes that **the only identifiable section of India's population which does not destroy its girl children deliberately or by neglect are the Adivasis**. My friends, if I as a grandmother ask you, which of India's peoples are more socially developed? In my opinion, the only identifiable group are those whom we have always been taught to believe as the most backward, least civilised and most deprived. I am leaving you with a challenge - **can you contribute to women's empowerment in this country unless the leadership in that movement is provided by women from these most deprived/backward groups?**

Remember, their vulnerability within their own communities is on the increase. Tribal women, particularly from the North-East are beginning to question their growing loss of customary rights and freedoms which they enjoyed in the past, and demanding extension of the 73rd Amendment to the Sixth Scheduled Areas to give them greater access to the political decision making processes of which they are now deprived. Please remember that in these times of ethnic movements in the name of identity politics, women of these communities are coming together with their counterparts from other groups - who are equally victims of poverty, discrimination and lack of access to or control over resources, as well as their own bodies . I find in these trends the germs of not only a socio political contradiction, but also of a counter-sanscritisation process.

Some years back I had asked Srinivas if he would agree that the educational process in India had become one of the most powerful instruments of his sanscritisation process? Not only did he agree with me, but in my opinion that is the reason why he called women's studies in India a 'challenge from below'.

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