

**DIALOGUE WITH RESEARCHERS LINKING POLICY AND RESEARCH -  
A CONSULTATION ON WOMEN'S STUDIES**

**27 February 2002  
Vijyan Bhavan, New Delhi**

**Evolutions of Women's Studies in India**

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For various reasons friends within women's studies and the women's movement in India have conferred on me an unasked for role as the recorder and chronicler of these twin movements in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In that capacity I am frequently faced with the unpleasant responsibility of a contemporary historian - of straightening out the factual evidence to avoid mystification and confusion which comes from loss of institutional memory. I was informed on the 25<sup>th</sup> that I have to speak about the ICSSR's role in initiating women's studies in India. Yesterday I was informed that I must speak on the Evolutions of Women's Studies in India. The aide memoire sent out by the NIPCCD states that the ICSSR played a pioneering and pivotal role in **setting up women's studies centres** and further impetus was provided when UGC set up women's studies centres in 1986 in 22 Universities and 11 colleges. These contain some errors. The statement that the **'landscape of institutions (government, NGOs, political and religious groups, educators, funding agencies) have given the bone and muscle to the efforts to strengthen women's movement'** is a-historical - and will only contribute more muscle and strength to the propaganda that the siamese twins - women's studies and the women's movement in India are offshoots of similar movements in other parts of the world and are therefore 'foreign inspired, foreign funded and therefore anti-national'.

The women's movement in India was rooted deep within India's struggle for freedom and recorded its first major victory in the acceptance of gender equality (a) in the Fundamental Rights Resolution of the Indian National Congress (1931); and (b) in the Constitution of the Indian Republic. 25 years later The Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India concluded that India's social, economic and political evolution since Independence **had only further advanced the process of subordination and impoverishment of the majority of women, instead of reversing it as per the Constitutional mandate.** The Committee included both leaders of the pre-Independence women's movement and a group of professional social scientists who called themselves the 'first generation beneficiaries of the equality clauses of the Constitution'. Drawing on the mass of expanded social science research material, and face to face discussions with thousands of **non-beneficiaries**, the Report questioned with incontrovertible data the

**developmentalist** belief that status of women is a social issue that would inevitably change for better with educational and economic growth. The impact of the Report on those who participated in its preparation and those who read it was **to define a new agenda for women's studies in the country which stressed the dynamism and pluralism of Indian society, in contrast to the monolithic discourses of the nationalist or the developmentalist schools.**

The ICSSR's Programme adopted three distinct objectives: (a) to identify and work for needed policy changes, (b) to persuade the social science community to reexamine the methodologies, concepts, theories, and analytical apparatus **which had successfully excluded women's multiple roles, and changes in their status and situation from most areas of social investigation - thus rendering them invisible, and (c) to revive the social debate on the women's question which had faded out in the post-Independence period.** Institution building was not one of its objectives - development of social scientists and academics in general was. Catalysing the voices of protest from below was the last and major objective. It should be remembered that the programme was born during the dark days of the Emergency - a brain child of a Gandhian freedom fighter, the late Prof. J.P. Naik. By the time the Emergency ended, and the new Government decided to open up all development policies for review, the package of research results from the ICSSR Programme were available to sharpen the debates on policies for employment, population and development, rural development, and education.

The next five years witnessed the revival of the women's movement aided and abetted by a growing number of women's studies scholars - women and men - with a growing body of information, and questions on definition, priorities, strategies, and methodology. The efforts of the first planning groups (1977-80) would have fallen before the resistance from entrenched institutional and socio-political privileges without the reemergence of the women's movement - heralded by the countrywide agitation over the Mathura rape case (1979-80). I would like to record that agitation could not have taken place without the Open Letter to the Chief Justice of India authored by four legal academics who had been involved in the work of the CSWI. A year later, the Indian Association for Women's Studies was born through the First National Conference on Women's Studies - organised by a group of academics but supported wholeheartedly by trade unionists, political and social activists of all hues, as well as our allies within GOI, ICSSR and others.

In its early years (50s-70s) the UGC had gone out of its way to expand women's access to higher education and science education in particular - by relaxing its eligibility conditions, while extending grants to women's colleges. Its Expert Committee (M.N. Srinivas, Leela Dube etc.) appointed to consider the recommendations of the CSWI, recommended **enhanced involvement of the University system in undertaking research and teaching on the 'invisible' groups.** There was no follow up. Instead, the UGC withdrew the preferred status of women's colleges for grants. It was only after the advent of Dr. Madhuri Shah, as Chairperson in early 1981 which coincided with the First National Conference on Women's Studies, that letters went out from the UGC to all Vice Chancellors, on the need for Universities' involvement in teaching and research on

“issues relating to women’s status in the context of social change”. Increasing collaboration between the Indian Association for Women’s Studies, the ICSSR’s Committee on Women’s Studies and the UGC began from this date and evolved five years later with the introduction of the UGC’s Programme of Women’s Studies in February 1986. However, the announcement by the new Government of India in January 1985 that it intended to undertake the formulation of a new National Education Policy provoked Dr. Madhuri Shah (in her joint capacity as Chairperson, UGC and President, Indian Association for Women’s Studies) and Dr. Phulrenu Guha (Member of Parliament and former Chairperson of the CSWI) to write letters to the Education Minister on the **critical importance of adopting women’s studies as an instrument to correct the gender biases of the national education system that reflected social as well as academic prejudices of the privileged classes rather than the needs for educational and social development.**

The inclusion of the section on Education for Women’s Equality and the mandate to the “National Education System to play a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women” was an outcome of pressure exerted by the twin movements and their allies within the government and academia, **and the fact that the UGC’s Programme of Women’s Studies was already on the ground.** But for that the reference to women’s studies within the policy statement was uncertain till the end. The UGC’s commitment to and understanding of the criticality of women’s studies as an instrument for educational reform is best assessed out by two telling facts: (a) that the budgetary head for women’s studies was Non-formal Education which lacked both resources and status within the Commission’s bureaucracy; and (b) that the two periods of UGC’s serious involvement in the propagation or expansion of women’s studies coincided with the Chairpersonship of Dr. Madhuri Shah and Prof. Armaity Desai.

I want to conclude with some observations made by the Tenth Plan Working Group on the Social Empowerment of Women.

The last two decades have witnessed two majors thrusts/changes:

- A. Three sociopolitical interventions by the Government precipitated by the women’s studies and women’s movement **of this country** :
  - (i) incorporation of women’s development within anti-poverty programmes (1985);
  - (ii) the National Policy on Education and the literacy campaigns (1986-‘90s);
  - (iii) the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment ensuring one third membership of women in local self government bodies.
- B. A major women’s mobilisation effort through intervention by non-state intermediary organisations across the country, who mobilised thousands of women’s groups for social and economic empowerment.

The government only adopted the policies and programmes. But the strategies were provided largely by the Women's Studies and Women's Movements who joined hands and played the catalyst role to 'look below the surface'. The understanding about group dynamics, emphasising the role of women in the environmental issues and natural resource management and rejection of the myth of passivity and incapacity of women in Panchayats etc. are a few examples of these contributions".