

Speech Given at ISST Silver Jubilee Celebration

8 October 2005

ISST - 25 Years

My association with ISST began during the tours of the CSWI. Devaki and Lakshmi's house was on my way home - and I would stop by occasionally, and share some of the shocks from our tours - answering their many questions, and seeking answers from this pair of economists. The CSWI had no economists - on the Committee or the small research staff. Most of the shocks that made some of us nearly cry, on the other hand, were rooted in economic distress.

My earlier encounters with acute poverty were among university students - in Patna where I taught, and in colleges in Rajasthan, MP and the North Eastern States which I had to survey while I worked in the UGC. The poverty that we met on the CSWI's tours was totally different - in dimension as well as response. In comparison to the University Students, mostly men, because the handful of women in these institutions came from middle class or upper middle class families, the poverty afflicted women the CSWI met were part of the peasantry or the urban poor, Phulrenudi, our leader on these tours - realized some of my distress and would try to console - with occasional jokes about the 'ivory tower' distance of universities in a country like India, and its ground - level realities.

The other vivid impression from these tours was about the toughness, hard realism and spirited fighting capacity of these women - in rural and urban areas, Lakshmi and Devaki would ask me to recount some of the actual conversations, and be surprised at my ability to recall actual words used by the women - in the places where I did not need any interpreters.

I moved into the ICSSR straight from the CSWI, and one of the first studies supported by the ICSSR's new Research Programme on Women's Studies was Devaki's case study on SEWA, which ICSSR published under the title "From Dissociation to Rehabilitation". Devaki's long - term relationship with these fighting women evolved further - to 5 case studies, published in time for the ESCAP Regional Preparatory Conference in 1979 at Delhi, under the title "Women's Quest for Power".

Two years before this, Elaben, Devaki and I found ourselves in the IDS (Sussex, UK), assisting Scarlett Epstein in organizing a Study-Seminar for African and Asian Scholars who were going to participate in a major research project on Women and Development. Scarlett had not really planned how the participants should be engaged through the three weeks. Something had to be done in a hurry. Devaki knew some of the resident faculty, while I had got to know Richard Jolly (the then Director), and Ron Dore - during a similar seminar on Education and Development that they had conducted a few years earlier.

Between the two of us we managed to pull in several of the IDS faculty to act as discussion leaders. **The outcome was beneficial to both groups.** The Faculty - (apart

from Scarlett, all male, and mostly economists) **had no acquaintance with the issues of women within the complex processes of change taking place globally, which they - the IDS Faculty - studied as Development.** The women participant scholars learnt some theoretical wisdom from the Faculty - **but taught them a hell of a lot more about the diversity of development experiences - across regions, social location and gender.**

I still remember Richard Jolly's shocked response to a photo projection of SEWA's handcart pullers. Horrified at the way the two women were harnessed to the heavily loaded cart, he shouted, "This should not be allowed!". Elaben kept her cool, and explained that the women had families to support, and no alternative occupation in sight. I do believe that Jolly's conversion to becoming an ally of all of us began from that day.

From the seventies of the last century to five years of the new century is a long journey - that the oldies present here have traveled together - learning as well as unlearning many things. A long time back I had learnt a Sanskrit shloka - *Sa Vidya, ya Vimuktiye* i.e. 'That is learning which liberates'. My personal experience has been different. **The CSWI experience was mind-shattering, but instead of liberating - it pushed most of us into a fighting/challenging mode. Building institutions was the most constructive way to harness our anger, energies and skills that we possessed - to help promote a global movement for women for a better world.** Where have we reached? Let us take a look at the **Millennium Development Goals** - supposedly accepted by all member-States of the United Nations, and what the Human Development Report 2005 has to report:

I should warn you that as a student and teacher of international politics, I have become increasingly skeptical of these high sounding professions of development goals and quantitative indicators to measure them. The global scenario of the last 25 years **do not offer me much basis for expecting real wisdom from those who control the destinies of the developed North, dare to classify large chunks of the world as "failed states", and make war on countries which had achieved substantial progress on some of the MDGs in the decades before they incurred the wrath of the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.**

Years ago, I acquired the title of **Cassandra** - at some international workshop or Seminar, for asking all the participants to look at the sex ratio trends as the most important indicator of future problems, and past mistakes. I am a student of history, and the CSWI's exercise taught me this as a lesson.

According to the HDR, South Asia is one of the culprits for lagging behind the MDGs. Would some of us not like to **ask why the United States and the United Kingdom which come 10th and 15th in the public expenditure on health care and services should take on the task of rescuing the peoples of Afghanistan and Iraq from "failed state ship"? Or should we start looking for how much these two philanthropic governments spent on weapons of mass destruction - bombs dropped, and human lives destroyed - irrespective of their gender, nationality and age.** Unfortunately, I can't get an answer to that from the HDR. But decades earlier, I used to teach from a book titled *Death Pays a Dividend*: one of the authors was Fenner Brockway, an admirer and associate of Mahatma Gandhi. The book offered evidence from high level

investigations conducted by US Senate Committees, British Royal Commissions and an Expert Team appointed by the League of Nations. The book was actually circulating among officers of the Indian Army serving in Iraq in 1940-41. My brother-in-law in the Medical Corps found it interesting and left it at home on his return. The title reflected the contents. There was enough damning information against large MNCs like ICI, Dupont de Nemours, plus French and German manufacturers of Steel and steel based armaments who were linked through Cartel arrangements to share the profits from the marketing of products which killed their own soldiers and civilian populations during the two World Wars, plus the Spanish Civil War and Mussolini's War against Ethiopia, and other more localized conflicts in different corners of the World.

The evidence of partial complicity of the respective governments in all these deals was sufficiently damaging for this Gollan's publication to disappear from the book shops at Oxford, London and Edinburgh in the early 60s - when I searched for another copy.

From Brockway's critique to Martin Luther King's speech that sparked off the Civil Rights Movement in the United States (1963) is a passage of 23 years. In terms of the average life expectancy in many parts of the developing countries, certainly those described by the UN as the least developed - I can safely describe this as a generation's life-span.

King's speech described the US Constitution as a "promissory note" - guaranteeing freedom and social justice for all its citizens. Successive governments had turned it into "a bad check" which has come back marked 'insufficient funds'. "But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the vaults of opportunities of this nation".

The HDR 2005 describes the Millennium Development Goals also as 'a promissory note' - written by 189 governments to the world's poor people - which falls due in 10 years time. "Without an investment of political will and financial capital today, it too will come back marked 'insufficient funds'. Such a default - according to the HDR - will affect both 'the credibility of the governments' that made the pledge, and the future of international cooperation 'to resolve global problems'.

The MDGs give top priority **to eradication of extreme hunger and poverty and the last to "reforming aid and trade with special treatment for the poorest countries"**.

Universalisation of Primary Education is Goal 2, Reduction of Child Mortality is Goal 4, of Maternal Mortality is Goal 5 and Promotion of Gender Equality, empowerment of women, + elimination of gender disparity in primary + secondary schooling is Goal 3. Goal 6 aims to combat HIV / AIDS, Malaria and other diseases; Goal 7 promises environmental stability + halving proportion of people without safe drinking water and sanitation. If anyone here can help me to understand the logic, or realizable prospects of these goals, I shall be immensely grateful. Secondly, would some of you care to take on a spot of detection - of how much was spent on getting it prepared and through the publication/distribution stage?

But I must not spoil the spirit of this celebration by sounding angry and despondent. Let me instead celebrate our South Asian identity, because **among all regions of the world, south Asia - represented by SAARC - was the only one to dedicate a decade to the Girl Child. And, the twin movements of India - Women's and Women's Studies were the first to articulate the enormity of the declining child sex ratio - which is now a global problem.** The only region which escapes the charge of getting rid of girls as a Final Solution to the Population Question is the Least Developed, which means Africa, parts of Latin America and some of Island societies - e.g. Caribbean.

The document giving a sketchy history of ISST informs me that people here have worked on some demographic issues. May I suggest that you give the 'missing' girl child phenomenon - I call it a virus - spreading across the world since 1980s - some sustained attention in the coming years?

And please enable the South Asian Women's/women's Studies movement to claim a leadership role in giving priority in our struggle to the claims to life of our daughters and grand-daughters!

Let me conclude with some excellent news. Two days ago, I received an E-mail from a woman definitely South Asia in origin, currently working at a Centre for Genetics and Society, who is coming to India within a fortnight to learn from our research and campaigns against sex selection. I hope ISST will share in the expanded responsibility. Send me the names of volunteers who will take the responsibility so that they can be informed in time.

Some Notes/Quotes from HDR 2005

"While South Asia is projected to make strong progress on income poverty, it will still account for 10% of malnutrition in 2015. This is consistent with the current pattern in which South Asian countries record levels of malnutrition comparable to those in Sub - Saharan Africa, despite higher average incomes - **an outcome that highlights the central role of gender inequalities in blocking advances in nutrition**". (p.43)

[Promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women, elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary schooling by 2005 and no later than 2015 is MDG 3 - achieving universal primary education is MDG 2. Cutting child mortality under 5 goal 4. Are the authors unaware of pre-birth mortality?]

Figure 1.1 0 (p. 43) questions '**which children will die**' - and projects that the major share will be in sub-Saharan Africa, (28.1) Arab States (3.0), E. Asia/Pacific (2.9), S. Asia (7.2), L. America & Caribbean (0.2) = **All developing countries - 41.4**. Cumulative shortfall from the MDGs [Again the anxiety to place all the failures/crimes on the developing countries - omit answering the question in real terms - ignoring the value underlying MDGs 3&5.] to close gender-gaps in education powerfully symbolizes the hope that the transmission of poverty across generations can be broken. While the world is moving in the right direction, progress is too slow to achieve the 2015 targets".

'46 countries going backwards' - will not meet target until after 2040 - they account for 23 million of 110 million children out of school in developing countries (pA3)'.

[Language of MDG3 uses Equality, **empowerment** and elimination of **disparity** in access to schooling - confusion, which should get priority? **Martin Luther King in 1963** - "The US confection is a promissory note, guaranteeing freedom and social justice for all... successive governments have given African Americans 'a bad check which has come back - marked 'insufficient funds' ... We refuse to believe that the bank of injustice is bankrupt'. (p. 39, HDR, from King's 'I have a Dream' speech, 28th August, Washington D.C]

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The Millennium Development Goals

In September 2005 the UN General Assembly will review achievements since the Millennium Declaration of 2000, including progress towards the eight Millennium Development Goals. These goals provide tangible benchmarks for measuring progress in eight areas, with a target date for most of them of 2015.

- Goal 1: Eradicate extreme hunger and poverty. Halving the proportion of people living on less than \$ 1 a day and having malnutrition.
- Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education. Ensuring that all children are able to complete primary education.
- Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women. Eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondly schooling, preferably by 2005 and no later than 2015.
- Goal 4: Reduce child mortality. Cutting tile under-five death rate by two-thirds.
- Goal 5: Improve maternal health. Reducing the maternal mortality rate by three - quarters.
- Goal 6: Combat HIV / AIDS, malaria and other diseases. Halting and Beginning to reverse HIV / AIDS and other diseases.
- Goal 7: Ensure environmental stability. Cutting by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and sanitation.
- Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development. Reforming aid and trade with special treatment for tile poorest countries .