

**ADDRESS TO THE  
SIXTH NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF  
ALL INDIA DEMOCRATIC WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION**

**24<sup>th</sup> November 2001  
Visakhapattanam**

**Vina Mazumdar\***

Twenty years ago, I inaugurated your Conference on the invitation of a group of your leaders – led by Vimal Ranadive and Susheela Gopalan. Through the late seventies to the early nineties we fought many battles together. Today I have to join you without them. Old people are apt to dwell on the past for memories of hope and courage, especially when the present looks too bleak. Please forgive me if I talk a little about those memories.

I met Vimal for the first time when the CSWI was at work, along with a few other trade unionists. I lost touch with the others – but she maintained the relationship, providing warmth, support and advice – to a novice in political mobilization – like an elder sister. When Ela Bhatt and SEWA were thrown out by the Majoor Mahajan in 1981, she sat with me and called all national trade unions as well as women's organizations to assure support to the beleaguered group. Ela was in hospital, after a major operation, fighting ill-health and depression together. Her husband called me to thank Vimal on his and Ela's behalf – saying that our telegram about the meeting had helped them both.

My last long session with Susheela was in 1993 – talking to the victims of communal violence in MP and Gujarat after the Babri Masjid demolition – sharing our heart sickness. But the particular memory which I have treasured, and want to pass on to you, came a decade earlier. I was interviewing her on women's political participation I remember her words vividly.

“We must participate in the women's movement fully, to transform our **own** consciousness; and also in the wider people's movements – to understand the nature of the connection between the two. Finally, we must fight our way to the Party's decision-making bodies to **educate** the leadership on these connections”.

I asked her “If you add to this the need to earn a livelihood, what time will it leave for any personal or family life?” She looked at me very seriously – then said,

“You think I am being inhuman? Alright Vina – for the younger colleagues we may have to plan out some time to stagger their responsibilities. But

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for yours and my generation there cannot be such time – because we slept for twenty five years”.

My task is to speak on the Indian Women’s Movement. It is difficult to be analytical and objective about something which changed the direction of my life, my beliefs and priorities – associates, friends and enemies, especially when the grimness of the present aggravates one’s failing capacities. Please forgive me if I limit myself to the achievements, and leave you to cope with and correct our failures.

The world and our nation today is fraught by a **crisis – of identities** - personal, familial, communal, caste, linguistic, cultural, religious – and is heading for another holocaust of destruction, violence, inhumanity and injustice. As a student of politics I believe that one must evolve one’s political identity. I have also come to realize that political ideologies which seek to restrict identities to accidents of birth can never accept women’s rights to equality, justice or freedom of any kind.

During the dark days of the Emergency – surreptitiously developing the ICSSR’s Women’s Studies Programme, and dreaming of a resurrected, reconstructed women’s movement in India, I wondered whom that movement would represent. By the eighties, the emerging new leadership of the movement gave me the answer – when the National debate on the NPP (‘88), convened by the Seven Sisters **rejected** the Draft’s recommendation for 30% reservation for women in all elective bodies, to be initially filled by nomination. Instead, priority was given to 30% **elective** reservation – with due protection for Adivasis and Dalits - in Panchayat Institutions and Municipalities. The CSWI had taken a somewhat similar position along with women political leaders from different parties in 1974. At that time, when Lotikadi and I asked the majority of the Committee’s members how they could rationalise recommending women’s panchayats and reservations in Municipalities to enhance women’s role in local self government while rejecting a similar device in other elective bodies - the answer was an echo of the voice of several prominent women political leaders. - “We don’t want women to be equated with Harijans and Adivasis. In 1988 I asked Susheela the same question. **Her answer – “We need a new leadership – from below”.**

This shift in perspectives and future assessment of the movement was also shared in the thrust and the quest for new knowledge that the Indian women’s studies movement evolved since its inception with the ICSSR’s Women’s Studies Programme - as a **political strategy to counter the effects of the Emergency. The public rationale was the need to respond to the appeal of the CSWI. But the hidden agenda, fully shared by the members of the Advisory Committee which guided the programme and the ICSSR’s leadership was distinctly more political.** I went straight from the AIDWA’s inaugural conference to the first National Conference on Women’s Studies at Mumbai. The atmosphere was throbbing with political expectations and fervour.

Five years later M.N. Srinivas (an active leader of the ICSSR Committee) named women's studies as the "most significant development in Indian social sciences during the last decade, and a **challenge from below**". (Inaugural Address at the World Conference of Sociology, Delhi, 1986).

As a political analyst, I claim that **this major shift helped the women's movement to resolve not only its crisis of identity and representative character but also the crises of legitimacy and penetration.** The women's liberation movements of the West, initiated in the '60s had begun to fragment and fade out by the mid-'80s because they had not resolved these three inevitable crises. The Indian movement, on the other hand, was entering a far more effective phase - **widening its popular base far beyond the urban middle class, and was able to overcome various challenges - ideological and developmental.** The second half of the '80s witnessed the State's acknowledgement of the movement's demands for visible presence and share for women within education policy, economic development - especially anti-poverty programmes and land reform - plus the constitutionalised reincarnation of local self government or grassroots democracy.

Much has been said about the dislocations ushered in by major changes in the character of globalisation, the Indian State, and the condition of the people through the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century till now. You will be debating all these in the next few days, to plan out needed strategies for the future. I will conclude here by quoting from a Tenth Plan Working Group on Women's Empowerment (April 2001), **acknowledging the these socio-political interventions that I mentioned earlier as having been 'precipitated' by the Women's Movement of this country.** The group describes the outcome as "a major women's mobilisation effort ... a huge conscious and active women's force at the grassroots" ... imbued with "a sense of right to resources as their constitutional and human right ... (the movement ) played the catalyst role to look below the surface, **providing understanding about group dynamics,** emphasising the role of women in environmental issues and natural resource management, and rejecting the myth of passivity and incapacity of women ... this major women's upsurge ... and active transformatory leadership from grassroot women themselves are indicated in (a) the jump in female literacy (from 22% in 1971 to 54% in 2001) to a **critical mass that foretells marked changes in human energy and social change;**... (b) the rise in women's participation in panchayat and municipal elections as candidates and voters"; and (c) "Domestic violence which forms the largest component of all forms of violence against women is a **negative reflection on the state of our society.** Its **higher visibility** is however indicative of a **building anger and positive demonstration of assertion by women of their rights.** It is time that the government recognises the existence of this massive force at the grassroots, take note of the emergence of the upsurge and **respond by utilising this critical mass of human resource.** The empowerment process is already on. Now is the time for a **leap**

**forward to empower women as the agents of social change and development".**

Before I bid you farewell let me plead with all of you to keep in mind a warning and a pointer from the same Group:

“It has to be noted that what is happening to the girl child today is no longer an outcome of poverty but more of prosperity among the beneficiaries of the economic progress achieved across the last half a century. That is why the group feels strongly that a national consensus on the rights and future of the girl child among all sections of society including government has to be a national priority, as its long term implications will determine the future of India”

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