

XITH NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON WOMEN'S STUDIES

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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The International Women's Year gave rise to a whole lot of events across India. But in the eyes of the general public and to the media in particular, they made little impact - because by the middle of the year, national consciousness was dominated by the National Emergency. The media became muted under severe controls. The Press, in particular, which had given extraordinarily wide and sustained coverage to the somewhat unexpected findings and conclusions of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) between February (when the Report was tabled before Parliament) and May (when printed versions of the Report and its summary became available) found it difficult to sustain this new born interest during the nineteen months of the Emergency.

The re-emergence of the women's movement in the post-Emergency period, however, resulted in many 'happenings' which received substantial public attention. Compared to the campaigns and the protest against the Mathura case judgement, or the anti-dowry violence protests, and dowry murders, the first National Conference on Women's Studies (Bombay, 1981) was not expected to be a 'happening' of much public interest¹. The Organising Committee's objectives were also modest to start with. They all shared the belief that the new scholarship emerging under this rubric was not being taken note of adequately by the education system. The CSWI, while calling the Government, the planners and the judiciary to account for their failure to carry out their constitutional mandates vis-a-vis women *had also thrown a challenge to the education system as 'the only system which could bring about changes in social 'values and attitudes 'which continued to obstruct the constitutional pledges of equality and justice for women; a 'responsibility' which the system had not addressed at all'*. While targeting the education system, the Conference brought together various sections like government functionaries, voluntary organisations, trade unions, and other sections in civil society to initiate 'the long overdue process of incorporating women's roles and experiences in academic studies'. *The long term hope was that increased communication between institutions, organisations and individuals - academic and non-academic - would help develop a pressure to awaken academia to its responsibility 'to make a deliberate planned and sustained effort so that the new value of equality can replace the traditional value system'.*

Very few of us had expected either the scale of response or that the Conference would assume the dimensions of a major 'happening'. The Editor of the Economic and Political Weekly dropped in occasionally and realised that the

¹ Press response was noticeably luke-warm

event's self generated momentum was fast overtaking the plans and expectations of the organisers. He therefore asked for an overall assessment by me urgently. EPW publishing this note within three weeks after the Conference² indicated his assessment of the significance of the event. Soon after this EPW also decided to publish regular reviews of women's studies as a part of their responsibility.

The Conference's model was the national 'congresses' of various academic disciplines which had already established long histories in the country. But a senior scientist, deputed to the Conference by her Vice Chancellor (more to show respect to the Chair of the Organising Committee who had just been appointed Chair of the UGC) found the atmosphere very different from other large academic gatherings.

'there were no cocktail parties, dinners and cultural programmes, yet delegates were enjoying themselves, they did not wander around the corners of the city because they are *involved in serious discussions*'.

The level of participation was very high, not dominated by 'experts' or members of the organising committee (they were too busy trying to provide adequate support services to play the role of experts). What emerged therefore was a genuine result of collective deliberations and not the passage of a pre-planned set of recommendations. 19 working group reports, desperately seeking to make 'concrete recommendations', however, revealed the running thread of a 'rather nebulous idea - that what was necessary was a *transformation* of structures, of ethos, of quality and behaviour through the unity of scientific studies, mobilising action, and spreading awareness among the public - within educational, health and legal systems, among the media and the worlds of creative literature, science and technology. It is this underlying idea that made participants feel that they were taking part in a *movement* and not just a conference'.³

Amongst the various concrete recommendations made by the Conference the most important one was to the participants themselves, that 'the momentum generated by the Conference should be continued. The Conference therefore resolved to form an Indian Association for Women's Studies *with state level branches and journals in all regional languages to provide a forum for interaction amongst individuals, institutions and organisations engaged in teaching, research or action for women's development*'.

My original purpose in quoting at such length from this nineteen year old paper was basically to maintain a role imposed on me by some good friends of the women's studies movement - 'to preserve the memory of politics (read struggles) so that the politics of memory does not defeat us', but while going through the paper written when the full impressions of the Conference were still vivid in my

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3. Vina Mazumdar, Women's Studies : Challenge to Educational System, EPW, 16 May 1981

mind brought out how many of those memories had in fact faded from my mind also. For instance the mandate which gave birth to this Association emphasised state level branches and journals in all regional languages and we have been discussing in various recent meetings of the EC, how to assist and strengthen publication of women's studies material in regional languages and at the same time promote interregional communication and comparative studies.

Another interesting coincidence is the theme of the present Conference. The first National Conference's major emphasis was on public policies covering a broad range of areas 'as they *affect* women and their role in society'. This time we are discussing women's *perspectives* on public policy. So the movement - to a considerable extent - the creation of that 'happening' nineteen years ago - *moved in strength and ideology from the politics of recommendations to the politics of assertion and participation* - political responsibilities in a democracy for all citizens and systemic institutions - like those responsible for shaping the values and mindsets of future generations

A third parallel is the range of support that made both the 1st and this Conference possible - from national and international agencies who recognise in this movement not only its challenge but its germs (or seed) of playing a major constructive role in all areas of human and social development, national as well as international. Yet another significant feature is the presence in our midst of many individuals, young and old - who came to the earlier one with no clear expectations, and little intention of taking up women's studies as a serious intellectual or social preoccupation, but whose increasing involvement, against great odds, has helped to provide vitality, expanding concerns and vision to the women's and the women's studies movements in South Asia.

Inbuilt in to the movement was a search for allies among constructive critic reformers of various subsystems in society - educational, legal, health etc., and a conscious attempt to utilise opportunities - e.g. Madhuri Shah's and later Armaity Desai's tenure as Chairperson, UGC or the decision of the Rajiv Gandhi Government to reformulate a national policy on education. The struggle to incorporate an explicit mandate for the national education system mounted during 1984-86 brought in several fallouts - some planned, some unplanned. Firstly, it was the insistence of the women's studies movement to reiterate the concept of equality in a system where such concepts were already facing erosion, that virtually forced the Education Ministry to refer to other minorities, especially Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the same Chapter - Education for Equality. Since a substantial section of women's studies scholars were already engaged in examining the issues and experiences of a 'majority' - poor women, who were victims of 'exclusion' in social development and academic discourse alike, in the eyes of the political establishment at least women's studies came to acquire a political identity as well as an ideology which challenged the status quo and vested interests in academia and society at large.

I am not too sure how many new entrants into women's studies understood or accepted this tag at that point of time. I would however claim that *the genesis of this identity and ideology can be traced to the collective articulation of concerns at the first National Conference itself and in the selection of themes in successive National Conferences.*

The political context within which women's studies in India was born was nursed through its infancy and adolescence is however very different today. In the last three successive conferences - we tried to address the realities and implications of globalisation a process affecting inverse affecting the lives of every citizen of this country but women in particular, increasing inequalities or negative trends at various levels. *But the situation we face today presents a clear threat to the survival of women's studies as an organised movement.* The threat manifests itself in subtle ways. On the one hand there is the continuous attempt to marginalise WS' catalyst and participatory by to its legitimate position in integrated discussions on the future role of education in our society.

Prior to 1985, women were considered in educational policy and planning merely as receipt, in spite of the rising gender gap in literacy and elementary education. Only in 1985 because the Rajiv Gandhi Government stated concern for 'women's issues' it was possible for the women's studies movement to demand a national seminar, to identify policy inputs from the perspectives of the excluded majority. Despite the momentum built up by the literacy campaign and programmes like Mahila Samakhya. The proposed 83rd Constitutional Amendment Bill declaring education as a Fundamental Right eliminated the whole section in Early Childhood Care and Education as an essential support to achieve 100% enrolment of girls in the formal schools, introduced in the 1986 Policy only under the pressure of the movement. The Constitutional Directive to make education free and compulsory for the entire population upto the age of 14 was to be withdrawn and replaced by a more limited right for the age group 6-14. Fortunately the old alliance was strengthened further by the child rights lobby in pointing out that the Bill would violate International Convention of the Rights of the Child, ratified by the Governing of India as late as 1993, apart from putting an end to all hopes of universalising girls' elementary education. The amendment was drafted without any process of consultation and would have been adopted without the organised protest.

On the other hand it is the denial of adequate resource support within the formal education system and institutions, regarding it as a marginal adjunct - a populist gesture to satisfy the women's movement. Thirteen years after the adoption of the National Policy on Education there is very little evidence on the ground of success in transforming curricula at various levels or influencing research and pedagogic methodology. Women's studies is still seen as something which concern only women, and any one specialising in this area runs the risk of extinction of a scholarly future within professional academia. An alternative and far more subtle method is to use the language of market-friendly vocational oriented courses for women, including women's studies 'which offer job prospects' in the NGO sector engaged in development action - in

a situation where the State is divesting itself of much of its own social responsibilities. I am not saying that women's studies should not engage in any of these types of courses. All that I am anxious is that in pursuing them we do not lose our transformative ideological priorities.

Yet another trend that disturbs me is the increasing marginalisation of law in women's studies - losing thereby a major source of strength and allies in challenging the dominant structures in institutions and society. In the 1980s, a UGC Committee on Legal Curriculum recommended Law and Patriarchy as a basic theme in legal studies. There was no follow up. Last year, I visited the National Law School (Bangalore) to discuss the University's proposal for a Women's Studies Centre, sent to the UGC. Our Committee was struck by an extraordinary conundrum - a strong, articulate interest and concern among the Faculty, except for a group of students, with no inputs or encouragement from lone social scientist (a woman) who had involved these students in bringing out a Gender Justice Reporter, and providing a legal literacy training to 25 Coordinators of Women's Studies Cells in Women's Colleges. Both projects had been commissioned by the National Commission for Women. The Committee asked the Director, and Registrar to develop a new proposal involving the students and faculty, drawn from different departments, especially constitutional, criminal and international law, which we could then recommend to the UGC. The proposal never materialised.

I expect quite a few participants in this Conference are aware of the fate of the 21 new Women's Studies Centres recommended by the UGC Standing Committee on Women's Studies, after months of hard work in developing new guidelines for the 9th Five Year Plan, inviting proposals from Universities, and sending Visiting Committees to examine the capacity and needs of the applicants. All of them after being informed 'informally' that their proposals were accepted, have received curt letters from the UGC stating that the Commission has decided not to start any new Centre during the 9th Plan period. The National Commission for Women which is ex-officio member of this Standing Committee sought a clarification as to whether this decision was in response to financial stringency, and if so, which other plan schemes had also been affected, but has received no reply. I hope this Conference will address this issue at the General Body Meeting of the Association.

There are other evidence of efforts to single out organisations and institutions promoting women's studies for 'engaging' in political activities, while receiving external financial assistance. Set in the backdrop of declining governmental support in spite of the rhetoric regarding women's empowerment, it is imperative for all of us to confront the present and future possibilities of attacks. The NPE provided women's studies with legitimacy, but it can be dropped or altered tomorrow - unless the movement retains its vigilance.

Involvement in any struggle results in changing levels of consciousness and a decision to participate in bringing about change - for the better is an essential dimension of the right to human and social development and a democratic responsibility. If you believe in these basic character of women's studies - then

please devise strategies for combining the two and strengthen the search for solidarity and alliance building. Do not allow the hard-won gains of the last few decades to be lost through inadequacies or failures on our part – merely, or especially “when the times are out of the joint”.

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