

## VIIIth National Conference, 1999: Pune

### *President's Speech*

Nirmala Banerjee

It is my pleasant duty to welcome all of you, friends and fellow-members of the Indian Association for woman's studies, to this General Body Meeting of the Association. Though we had last met in December 1995, this EC did not begin functioning till June 1996. I am rather proud of the several things that we managed to do during this short period of two years and would like to briefly mention these for your information.

Right from the beginning, this EC had felt the need to expand the network of this body. We felt sure that there were many more who were interested in gender issues in different parts of this vast country, but found it difficult to build channels of communications with a centralised organisation. Because this EC had representation from almost all regions, we could begin the process. We encouraged each member of the EC to locally initiate, on behalf of the IAWS, some activity of immediate interest in her region. As a result, in 1997, as many nine such regional initiatives, quite often held in the local language, took place. They were spread all over the country from Trivandrum to Shillong to Chandigarh. This report includes at the end a list giving details about these activities, all of which apparently had got an excellent grassroots response. I am very grateful to the Ford Foundation, whose funds mainly saw us through these modestly organised activities and to my colleagues in the EC who carried out the task with great enthusiasm. They have certainly helped the Association to reach out to many more people than ever before.

We had another purpose in mind in sponsoring these regional activities. In a rapidly changing economy and society, many times we find that the official data system is neither fast enough nor gender-sensitive enough to keep us abreast of the diverse, region-specific changes in women's positions. The regional workshops, which had involved many local workers, filled in some of the gaps in our information. Unfortunately, in the period since, we have not had the time to publish the excellent reports that the co-ordinators had prepared from the proceedings. Only the report on the reservations workshop at Calcutta was published and is available here for sale.

Our other big activity was organising the national seminar on the "Early Years of the Independence", at Baroda in August 1997. Since we have managed to give all of you a booklet commemorating that seminar, I will not talk about it except to hope that the Association will have the resources to organise many more such in future.

Kavita Panjabi, one of the very enthusiastic members of the EC, was entrusted with the task of editing and producing the newsletters of the IAWS. She promptly put together a very impressive editorial team in Calcutta which brought out four newsletters in these two years. In spite of Calcutta's reputation for poor communications, Kavita managed to get together information from many quarters of the country to make the newsletters truly readable.

Kalpana Kannabiran, our young Joint Secretary, has performed wonders co-ordinating at the apex level the work of the organiser of the large number of sub-themes for this conference. She too found that it was not always easy to establish communications across the country - but nonetheless, she did a very efficient job of putting together whatever material she got. Most of the sub-theme co-ordinators too, readily took to their work and, as you saw in the last three days, did a wonderful job of organising the papers. I feel sure that with so much young enthusiasm coming forth, the Association has a very bright future ahead of it.

Apart from these academic activities, our very efficient General Secretary, Chhaya Datar, has managed to sort out a lot of the administrative muddles, given that the Association has no permanent office or staff. These problems are not easy to avoid. I do know however, that in cases, Chhaya has now created simple but adequate programmes to deal on a routine basis with difficulties such as renewal of memberships. I earnestly request all of you to check carefully whether or not your own membership details have been correctly entered.

In spite of Chhaya's best efforts at mobilizing friends to help us to get income tax exemption for the Association, the file is still languishing in Delhi. I hope the next EC will follow up the matter and get the clearance soon.

We are very happy to report that the elections for the next EC went off smoothly and the new EC will be able to take the reins of the Association immediately after this conference is over. I am grateful to Dr. Usha Thakkar for the very efficient and smooth "Operation Elections" that she carried out. The list of the elected members of the new EC is given.

Reports of the Secretary and the Treasurer will give you the details of the generous grants that we have received from several donors during these two years and which made our many plans for the Association's activities and for this well-provided conference a reality. I am personally very grateful to Kamla Bhasin for her role in achieving this. Without her constant help and advice, I at least would not have known how to go about this. Chhaya, with the help of the Maharashtra Stree Abhyas Vyaspeeth has managed all the details of the conference. Sitting in Calcutta, I was not of much help with any of these.

Throughout these two years, Neera Desai has been a great support for me personally. We both go back a long way in the history of Women's Studies and movement in this country. I remember the first occasion when I met her in 1978 at the IDS conference on the Subordination of Women at the Sussex University. That our ideas constantly jelled well together was perhaps due to the similarity in our ages; but it was also because we share a very live interest in the issues related to gender in India. Although Neera was not an office bearer in the EC, she has continued to put in seminal work in the cause of the Association as witnessed by the draft she has prepared for amendments to the IAWS constitution. Rohini Gawankar, another old friend, came to this EC with considerable experience of its work. On a number of occasions, her cool common sense put the breaks on our runaway ideas. I am grateful for her continued support and friendship.

Members of the Association, I invite you to the proceedings of this general body meeting of the IAWS.