

Report of the Seminar *Feminist Archiving: Possibilities and Challenges* organized by Dr. Avabai Wadia and Dr. Bomanji Khursehdji Wadia Archives for Women, Research Centre for Women's Studies and University Library, SNDT Women's University in association with Indian Association for Women's Studies from 13-14 December 2012

This seminar, *Feminist Archiving: Possibilities and Challenges*, brought together historians, social scientists and archivists to discuss the framework for a feminist archives. Beginning with an examination of the use and limitation of conventional archives in recovering women's histories, the seminar sought to evaluate the historical resources to be preserved in an archive.

It explored historiography through the experiences of scholars who have made innovative use of archival records and created women's history through oral/written narratives, private papers and photographs. Subsequently, it examined the creative possibilities of recovering/preserving women's histories and historical sources. The presentations uncovered the whole gamut of theoretical and practical considerations for the building of a repository of historical materials. The presentations indicated the politics of knowledge generation in the construction and preservation of historical memories. The question of who defines historical truth and whose voices are muted in history determines the selection, preservation and conservation of historical sources. Introducing the seminar, **Dr. Veena Poonacha** described the important attempts made by the Dr. Avabai Wadia Archives for Women and the Research Centre for Women's Studies and the Archives of the Indian Association of Women's Studies to research and preserve women's histories.

Dr. Iliana Sen, in her keynote address, spoke of the erasures in history: for the voices of those in the peripheries of history are not heard in the dominant/national histories. History writing, she said, was a record of the achievements of the dominant group. The recording/remembering of historical events are selective. Thanksgiving celebrated in the US as a day of deliverance, is not a day of celebration for the Native Americans; rather it is a day of mourning for them. Similarly, the history of the Spanish conquest of South America is not a story of victory for the indigenous people, whose numbers were decimated by the conquests.

Dominant historiography has celebrated violence against women and it has ignored women's historical experiences. It is only since the late 20th century that women's historical voices are

heard. To recover women's histories, it is necessary to search for evidence among the pots and pans that women have used--the many artifacts in the home that may have belonged to women and in their scribbles, songs or stories. There are class, caste and gender dimensions to historical memories. The sources of history are also determined by these markers of identities. Women and other dispossessed communities do not have the social, cultural and material artifacts that survive over a period of time to be able to reconstruct their histories. Their oral narratives and songs, for instance, cannot be easily woven into the rigid historical frames. The challenge is how do we recover and preserve those sources of history of women and other subaltern groups.

Dr. Uma Chakravarti, in her presidential remarks critiqued the writing and teaching of history. She said that history textbooks in schools do not reflect the many voices of history. She added, even family histories were also not the same for different members. Widows in upper caste Brahmin households, for instance, were treated as cheap labour and exploited by their families. She welcomed efforts made by Dr. Kumkum Roy to revise the history textbooks prepared by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT).

Plenary Session I: Conventional Historiography and the Politics of Writing History

Chair: Dr. Ritu Diwan

In her introductory remarks to the session, **Ritu Diwan** pointed to the absence of women across disciplines and her own struggles to engender economics. She also recalled the historic contribution of the RCWS and the IAWS to develop women's studies in the country.

Tracing the growth and development of feminist historiographies, **Dr. Uma Chakravarti** critiqued conventional historiography. She said that the writing of history was about power and the absence of it. History was a grand narrative of power. Written by men, the focus of history was on events and issues that were of interest to them. The History that we learnt was all about kings and monarchs, dynasties, wars and battles. It is a record of men and their achievements, the monuments they built and destroyed. Those without power were not allowed historical representation. The exclusions in history are deeply political projects, aimed at maintaining the power and privileges of the upper classes. The importance of the French revolution was precisely because people

conventionally excluded from history-- the working class and peasants-- were now finding a place in history. These people had challenged the established political power.

The writing of subaltern histories in the 1960s held great promise in challenging conventional history. It challenged the accepted tenets of historiography and opened exciting new venues for historical enquires. But the limitation of subaltern history writing in India was that it did not include women. The recovery of the many voices of history is not easy; it requires the reading of silences in historical records. Attempts to recover histories from below should also read the silences and recognize that the formal sources of histories are also skewed. There is a need to search for alternative sources and frame them within a paradigm. The importance of recovering women's histories is because their absence justifies social structures that promote inequalities. In the writing of this history, it is also necessary to recognize the intersections of caste, class and gender. Women in privileged position are also complicit in the oppression of the 'Other.' When women find representation in history, these women have been from the upper class/caste groups. By and large mainstream history has remained oblivious of gender as a category of historical analysis and therefore limited in scope. Archiving these new sources of history is to ensure that the future generations remain free of biases.

She said that the development of her history consciousness was also a product of her engagement with various struggles. Her engagement with feminist history grew out of women's protests politics against dowry and all forms of violence against women. These struggles forced her to confront the great Indian traditions. Subsequently, the participation of women in the Mandal agitation against the implementation of affirmative action for dispossessed communities forced her recognize the intersecting identities of gender, class and caste. She concluded by pointing out that historiography had still not fully questioned the public-private divide and that there are still areas and regions insufficiently integrated into history.

In order to indicate the creative possibilities of writing, reading and teaching history differently, **Dr. Kumkum Roy** discussed an experiment that she undertook with other historians and school teachers to develop fresh insights into history. The experiment was part of a project initiated by the National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT) to develop a

more inclusive history text books for schools. The scholars working on the project made every effort to ensure the experiences and perspectives of different groups of people were represented. As a case in point, she presented the chapter on the French Revolution introduced to students of Std. IX. While highlighting the importance of the French Revolution in expanding the scope of human rights, the text book, she said, also points to its limitations. It gave women limited rights, to education, participation in trade and also divorce; but it did not give women electoral right—a right which women acquired in France in 1946. Symbolizing the subordination of women was the decree that women could not wear the Phrygian cap—a privilege that men had to mark their freedom. The chapter also indicated that women endured their subordination under duress. It is possible to discern voices of protest by women by reading against the grain. To indicate women's aspirations for freedom, the textbook includes a painting by a woman artiste showing women wearing the symbolic cap. Such writing of history, representing the diversity of voices and experiences are useful in removing social prejudices. It should remain an important project for historians. But since the development of school text books is not a recognized criterion for the professional assessment of university teacher, it does not attract the attention of University teachers. Kumkum Roy also added that history was politically contentious in India. One never knows when these initiatives get politicized and these text-books get withdrawn.

Dr. Samita Sen stressed the need for archival research in the recovery of women's histories. Despite limitations, it was possible for a historian to read between the lines to recover women's histories. Archives are about state power. The preservation of archival materials also represents state power and control over knowledge production. Despite limitations, the writing and recovery of history requires accessing state archival resources. There are often gaps in the preservation of historical materials: sometimes, the destruction of valuable archival materials may be due to carelessness in handling, maintaining and preserving papers; and in others, there may be deliberate political action in erasing certain records. There is often no real explanation for the gaps that exist in archival records. The loss of important archival material can arise from arbitrary administrative decisions or because inadvertent errors of selection. During her research in the State Archives of West Bengal, she found the records of the 1930s were available for alternating years. She turned to a veteran archivist to solve this mystery. He informed her that the archival resources were divided during the partition of the country and the records for the alternate years were sent to

Dhaka. However, her search for these records in Dhaka was futile as these records were not found there.

Historical documents preserved in archives are public records which may not directly yield data on women or their lives. The absence of women in historical records has triggered a search for unconventional sources of histories. This quest for alternative sources overlooks the fact conventional sources can also reveal glimpses of women's lives. But by reading against the grain and the silences, it is possible to recover women's histories. Discussing the Age of Consent Bill in 1891, she said that the death of eleven –year-old Phulmani in Bengal, highlighted the need to legislate on the age of sexual consent in marriage. The public debates on the issue shed valuable light on the construction of bodies, sexuality and reproduction. She observed that the various legislations of a given period were often contradict each other. For instance, there is considerable difference in the definition of a child in the Age of Consent Bill and the Labour Legislations of the same period.

Plenary Session II: Women's Histories, Alternative Sources, Alternative Readings

Chair: Dr. Nandini Manjrekar

Leading the discussion, **Nandini Majrekar** said that there is need for alternate reading and alternate sources for the recovery of women's histories. It is in this context that both the IAWS archives and the Aavabai Wadia Archives become extremely important.

Dr. Kamala Ganesh discussed the archival project that she had undertaken for the Dr. Avabai Wadia archives for women. She had undertaken to recover the records of the Cancer Research Institute in Chennai which was founded by Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy—the first woman doctor in South India. Focusing on the many personal and public intersections in the development of an institution, she pointed to the need to examine written records along with other unconventional sources of history such as interviews and discussions. The juxtapositioning of the alternative histories with documentary sources, she said, points to ways by which private choices and circumstances shape institution and organizations. Kamala Ganesh spoke of how the Cancer Hospital in Chennai for the poor became a feminist archival project. Established by Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, the hospital aimed at reaching out to a wider cross-section of people. While

documenting the history of the institution, it is possible to map the trajectories of personal relationships that shaped the institution. The hospital has been developed through the personal relationships of three of its architects. Dr. Muthlakshmi Reddy who established the institution in the memory of her sister who had died of cancer, Dr. Krishnamoorthy, her son, and Dr. Shantha, who joined the institution very early in its history and had a close relationship with Dr. Krishnamoorthy.

Dr. Meera Velaydhun's paper *Addressing Cultures of Memory* drew from the soon to be published autobiography of her mother Dakshayani, a woman of tremendous determination and courage. The autobiography written in English with clearly delineated chapters, depict the unique journey of a woman from an agrestic slave community (Pulayas) of a small island of Bolghatty (Cochin). Overcoming the enormous caste/class and gender obstacles of her life, Dakshayani had the distinction of becoming the first Dalit woman graduate, a member of Cochin Legislative Council and a member of the Constituent Assembly.

Speaking of memories as contested and dynamic, Meera Velaydhun pointed to the layers of meanings and multiple frames of reference in the reading of the text now. She argues, Dakshayani's life uncovers several layers of modernity located in the context of her Gandhian background, her work with Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and as a member of the Constituent Assembly. Her autobiography reveals a strong and independent woman with clear and well articulated views on socio-political issues of the period.

Drawing from the story of Dakshayini's life, Meera Velaydhun, spoke of specific group relationships to the past-- caste, family, party and regional identities. She stressed the ways by which an individual's identity is shaped by the coming into being of a community and caste. She called this shaping of identities as social labour.

Dr. Christabelle Sethna in her paper, *Radical Records: State Surveillance and Women's History* questions, what counts as an archive? In an attempt to answer this question, she discusses her on-going research on a set of declassified documents from the Security Service of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RMPC) from the mid 1960s to 1980s. This was a period which

coincided with the cold war and the rise of the Canadian second wave feminism. The declassified files contain dossiers compiled by the RMPC on individual feminists, groups and events. The material, a rich source of data on surveillance, indicates the extent to which the state perceived feminism as a threat to national security and also reveals the gendered nature of surveillance. It indicates demands for day care and equal rights were seen as potentially threatening by the state. She concluded by raising several questions on the extent to which the identities of the various protagonists need to be protected.

Parallel Sessions

The two parallel sessions on *Building and Organizing Feminist Archives*, chaired by **Prof. Harsha Parekh** and *Feminist Interventions in Rewriting Histories* chaired by **Dr. Vibhuti Patel** also had several interesting papers. These included: **Sonal Shukla's** account of recovering the history of the freedom movement through the oral histories of women who participated in the freedom struggle. The documentary film that emerged out of the interviews uncovers the contribution of ordinary women to the Freedom movement—a contribution that may not be recognized in the writing of history. It also captures the passion and fervor of the people during the freedom movement. **Anju Vyas's** presentation on *Information Resources for Feminist Archives* began with a classification of the various primary, secondary and tertiary sources of history and also categorized the informal and alternative sources. Indicating the challenges of acquiring, classifying and storing grey literature, she concluded by indicating the rich collection of historical resources preserved by the Centre for Women's Development (CWDS), New Delhi. **Mosina Mukadam**, discussed her current project undertaken jointly with Dr. Sushma Powdwal on cooks books. The presentation analyzed the language, content and structure of cookbooks as reflections of women's lives and argued that it was possible to trace social change through these books. Some of the other important speakers were Dr. Nandita Saldanha, Dr. Ranjana Mishra, Dr. Urmila Pawar, Joica Thorat and Dr. Jaswandi

A documentary film *A Quiet Little Entry* produced by **Dr. Uma Chakravarty** was also shown to indicate the importance of the preservation of private papers in the recover of history. The film based on a private archival collection, documented the life and struggles for freedom by Subbalakshmi, a woman who lived in Cholamandalam a place known for its salt pans. She was

fortunate that she was taught to read and write. Her diary maintained in notebooks reveal her life her struggles. It sheds light of the intimate space of the family and the events in the public space during the freedom struggles.

Plenary Session III: Developing New Historical Resources for Women's Archives

Chair: Dr. Anita Ghai

Dr. Anita Ghai said that exclusions from social exclusions happened at many levels. The voices of the disabled, particularly women were rarely heard in history. The search for women's histories had also failed to focus on disabled women.

Pointing to the intersections between the public and private spaces in history, **Dr. Indu Agnihotri** recalled her own participation in the women's movement. Her journey into feminist politics and struggles began with her participation in the First National Conference of Women's Studies in 1981 in SNTD Women's University campus. At the conference, she had showcased the 200 posters on the recovery of archives prepared for an exhibition in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. This experience shaped her ideas and initiated her personal journey into archiving.

She said, the past three decades has been 'a long struggle for women's political assertion and also preserving and creating histories.' She, along with other activists, was out in the streets during the day and the night was occupied in preparing the pamphlets, posters and other documentary materials. There is no separation, she said, between the public and private. The need to preserve the documents generated by women's struggles is because of the process of forgetting that is apparent today. The many debates, contradictions and dissent within the struggles should be preserved.

Instead of accepting the received wisdom on the role of women in the freedom and anti-feudal struggles, it is necessary to examine archival records to gain fresh insights into women's political articulations. The women's question which was central to the 19th century social reform movement was subsumed within the nationalist movement of the early 20th century. But this did not mean that there were no undercurrents of feminist consciousness. It was a strategic masterstroke by the women's delegation from Women's India Association to meet the Montagu-Chelmsford committee set up to discuss the Indian demand for political representation and ask for

adult franchise. The various political groupings of the period, including the Congress) did not oppose women's demand for franchise. Some aspects of the early feminist position on suffrage can be debated-- why, for instance, did they accept education and property qualifiers for electoral rights? But nonetheless their political articulations need to be reclaimed. The five volumes of private papers of the 20th Century Assembly debates are a rich source of historical materials of women's memorandums and articulations.

We have not, however, exhausted the mine of archival records. The CWDS has valuable documentation on movements, struggles and also on the various memorandums that have been the focus of public debates. This rich archival collection is currently being digitized. The importance of the CWDS's repository of archival materials is that it is often called upon to restore Government's memories of the various Government Regulations affecting women. The RCWS is also an archive. She concluded by stating that we need both written and oral sources of histories. There can be a process of forgetting: Dr. Vina Mazumdar's memoir is a rich source on the history of the women's movement. In the preliminary drafts of her memoir, she had forgotten to mention her own considerable contribution in international forums to promote gender equality until its significance was pointed to her.

Dr. Genevieve Rail, in her presentation *Remembering/Rewriting women's bodies: reflections on post-structuralism and feminist historiographies* drew from her experiences in Quebec of connecting some of the smaller archives. Drawing from the theoretical shifts that have occurred in feminist history and the writings on women's bodies, she critiqued the grand historical narratives. Her critique of the dominant positivist, heterosexist, sexist, racist and colonial historiographies emerged out of the epistemological challenges posed by poststructuralists and feminists. The writings of Lata Mani and Kanchan Illiya along with other scholars from Africa posit important aspects of post-colonial political, epistemological, methodological and discursive challenges to the writing of history and the representation of women's bodies.

She argues for solidarity across borders in remembering/rewriting of women's bodies and transnational feminist histories across borders. She adds, post structuralism has contributed to the incorporation of ideas of the de-centering of the subject and deconstructs the fundamental

categories of historical analysis. It has dismantled the category of woman and stressed the need for language as distinct from experience. It also gives importance to women's experience. A women's archive project is built on the notions of social justice and recognizes the importance of pleasure and emotions as epistemological turning points. The archive, however, is not the preserve of historians but also others. The challenge of developing an archive in the digital age was considerable.

In her presentation on the *Story of the Calendar*, **Dr. Malavika Karlekar** described her own experiences of building an archive of photographs and other private papers. Focusing on the immense possibilities of recovering histories through photographs, she described the preparation of the CWDS 2013 calendar on Kalpana Joshi. The calendar, a mix of diverse historical materials, indicates the sub-text forms of archiving materials. Kalpana Joshi is well-known in history for her involvement in the Chittagong uprising in the 1930s. She was arrested and was given the sentence of transportation for life in 1933. The calendar presents images of her personal and public life after her release from jail. The photographs reveal facets that may not have been uncovered through the written word.

Apart from the technical details of recovering and preserving old photographs, her presentation indicated the modifications that she made in the photographs to tell the story of Kalpana Joshi's life.

Plenary Session IV: Conservation and Preservation of Archival Resources

Chair: Dr. Sushma Powdwal

Dr. Sushma Powdwal initiated the panel discussion by stating that archives and libraries are memory institutions. Conservation and preservation of archives are important resources.

Dr. Sumi Krishna presentation focused on her experiences of establishing the IAWS's digital archive and the nitty-gritty struggles of going through the grey literature to create this archive. There is a seamless connect she says, between the activists and the academic—a connection represented in the IAWS through its wide circle of membership. These connections are

not without tensions. Therefore the challenge faced by the organization is to find ways to minimize the divide.

The Association has played a vital role in ensuring the recognition of Women's Studies as a critical perspective in education and research both within and outside academia. The need to recover and preserve the many aspects of the struggles was the justification for the development of the archives. She described her attempt to create the digital archives to mark the silver jubilee celebration of the organization. In doing so she was entering a new terrain. She needed to grapple with the technical aspects of creating a digital archive. The development of the IAWS archives was facilitated by a Five Year Grant provided by the Ford Foundation. The continued challenge faced by the archive is the updating of the collection and the physical storage of archival materials scattered across the country. The current challenge faced by the IAWS is to recover and preserve the many email communications of the organization between the executive members and the members of the association.

In her presentation on *Conservation and Preservation in the Digital Age*, **Vrundha Pathare** drew attention to the practical difficulties of preserving histories. Drawing from her experience of developing the Godrej archives, she said that archival materials often provide new insights into the known histories. As an organization, Godrej had decided views on employing women on the shop floor and yet their archive had a 1967 photograph of women workers on the shop floor. Discussions with long-time employees of the company revealed that the company had employed women in their factory in Malaysia because women were perceived as better workers than men. The success of the initiative in employing women encouraged the Company to employ women in its factories in India.

She then discussed the techniques of preserving materials for the future. The aim of an archive, she said, was to bring order to the seemingly chaotic records. Preservation of archival materials begins from the day a decision is made on establishing an archive. The planning required consideration of space, money, storage and facilities.

Digitization is not the best option. Strategic planning also calls for guidelines on who handle the material and what precautions are needed in the handling of records. Conservation of old

records also needs care. The use of staples, cello tapes and pens are taboo in an archive. The storage of archival material should be consistent with the weather conditions. If it is not possible to provide 24 hour air conditioning, no attempt should be made to have an air conditioned storage space. Archival materials should not be stored in the basements. It should be stored in cupboards and damage proof boxes. There is also a need for disaster management plan to protect the archival material from destruction.

Dr. Sushma Powdwal spoke about conservation, preservation and restoration of archival material. The approach to archiving needed to be multi-pronged and required an assessment of the prevailing conditions for storage and preservation. Preservation of materials required action to prevent deterioration of documents. The users of archives also needed to be made aware on handling archival materials carefully. The preservation of books and rare manuscripts required care in cleaning and storage. The placement of books and the materials is important to prevent damage. Archival materials should be encased in polyester. The restoration of books and manuscripts may require physical and chemical interventions. She then described the efforts undertaken by the University to preserve the rare photographs of the vice chancellors and their papers (including their curriculum vitae) and rare books.

Panel Discussion: Using Unconventional Sources for Women's Histories

Chair: Dr. Shaila D' Souza

In her introduction to the panel, **Dr. Shaila D'Souza** posed the provocative question, on whether Women's Studies had developed alternative paradigms. She felt, despite claims, much of Women's Studies scholarship was located within mainstream theoretical formulations and wondered if the theme of this panel discussion should have been the first rather than the last.

Dr. Chhaya Datar's presentation focused on the action research study that she had undertaken to document the lives of the *beedi* workers in Nipani, located on the borders of Karnataka and Maharashtra. The region under study is a dry, drought prone area with a large *beedi* industry. This industry operates through a large network of contractors and home-based workers.

The study was part of a large project that Dr. Maria Mies conducted to document the living conditions of women workers globally.

Locating herself as an activist-researcher, working to unionize the workers and documenting the process of change initiated, Chhaya described the drudgery and everyday oppression of women. Many women in the *beedi* industry were *Devdasis* dedicated to the Goddess Yellamma as young children. Some of these women had a liaison with a rich man, whom they referred to as *malik*, and a few others may also have been sex workers.

Their stories were stories of courage and resistance. Some of these women resisted the cultural definitions of their lives as *devadasis*. They refused to perform the ritual which required them to carry the image of their patron goddess on their heads. The process of unionizing the women however was not easy. The prevailing caste and religious identities were important markers in their lives. It was difficult to get women to overcome these identities and collectivize against their exploitation. Further, discussing the richness and variety of women's language, she discussed the power/powerlessness indicated in the idioms of everyday expressions—some of these expressions were decidedly sexist.

Dr. Usha Thakkar began her presentation by remembering the early struggles to get Women's Studies accepted in the University system as a legitimate area of enquiry. Recalling the contribution of Dr. Neera Desai and Dr. Maithreyi Krishnaraj in providing the needed leadership to the development of Women's Studies she said that they had influenced her ideas and research interests. The early production of Women's Studies knowledge aimed at getting the word out. Those were the days when the present-day technologies were not available. Letters, notes, publication materials had to be carefully typed, proof read and cyclostyled—these were techniques that young people are not familiar with today.

Her engagement with Women's Studies, made her realize the limitations of her own discipline of Political Science in defining power and political participation; in the process, the existing divide between the personal and the public was blurred. Subsequently, Usha Thakkar described her joint project with Dr. Rohini Gavankar to recover women's lives.

The narratives contained poignant stories of women's sacrifices and suffering for the freedom of the country--sacrifices that are rarely acknowledged in history. Participation in the freedom movement, for instance, did not relieve women from their household responsibilities. They needed to care for their children, home and other members in the family along with their political activities. These activities varied from selling home spun *khadi* cloth, distributing pamphlets, picketing liquor shops and participation in political rallies. Maniben Nanavati, a noted freedom fighter, recalled sewing flags and participating in political rallies.

The narratives indicate the gendered nature of women's suffering. Some of them miscarried or delivered their babies in prison, others found themselves managing the home front alone when their husbands were jailed. They had to face innumerable hardships to make ends meet when their husbands were jailed. As one young woman remarked, "my father was a full-time freedom fighter whose sacrifices were acknowledged after independence. But who will remember my mother's suffering? She had to bring up four children with very little money and also became pregnant with another when my father was released from jail" On the plus side, these stories also portray the bonding among women within the confines of the prison. Women, who were better educated or were talented singers/dancers, taught other women these skills. Many women, for instance, learnt to read and write while in prison. An unplanned fall-out of women's political participation was the inadvertent change in gender relationships at home. Gujarati men, who tend to demand hot chapattis on the dining table during lunch and dinner, were forced now to accept cold food prepared earlier when their wives went out to participate in political activities.

Memories, she said, have both an individual and a collective dimension. These interviews aimed at recovering their individual and collective memories. She also wrote to the freedom fighters to pen their experiences. They had sheltered and taken care of their neighbors' children when the parents were jailed. These were ordinary women who lived ordinary lives but their contribution needs to be acknowledged in the history of the freedom movement.

Her presentation also pointed to the blurring of the divide between conventional and unconventional sources. What was unconventional some years back, had now gained acceptance in

the writing of histories. She also pointed to the importance of women's writings in the reconstruction of social history.

Dr. Veena Poonacha began her presentation entitled, *Family Stories, Photographs and Papers as Sources of History* by recalling one of the early lessons that she learnt in Women's Studies of the experiential bases of knowledge. This lesson infused her choice of research subject. Feeling devalued by the representation of her community in M.N. Srinivas's book *Religion and Society of Coorgs in South India*, she decided to examine the Coorg society from the standpoint of women's experiences. The study indicated the differences in the colonial and indigenous sources of history.

Subsequently, focusing on her family history, from 1860-1950, she narrated her experiences of locating three generations of women within the broader context of social change. While it would be wrong to assume that individuals are products of their times, it cannot be denied that the choices they make are defined by the opportunities and possibilities of the period. Finally, in her discussions she focused on the possibilities and pitfalls of writing family histories. It can lead to family tensions even though the stories narrated are over 50 years old. Further, there is no one story she added, there are many versions that are waiting to emerge. This leads to the challenging of the idea of a stable cohesive self as the subject of history. The writer writes herself into the narrative.

Valedictory Address:

Dr. C. S. Lakshmi's presentation began with the provocative question on how do you consume an archive. She located her arguments within her broader critique of the process of knowledge creation and in her inimitable style illustrated her arguments on the importance of seeing, understanding and writing differently. Her first illustration was the tendency of copy editors to translate and explain Indian words used in the text through a series of footnotes. By doing so, Lakshmi argued, Indian customs, motifs, expressions and even food items were reduced to a series of footnotes.

Seeing this as an example of the colonial/western project of knowledge management, she argued, that words from other European languages used in English texts are not always explained to this degree. For instance, she added ‘we have read many English novels where there are several French words which are not translated. We have read and understood these books, although we may have skimmed over the French words.’ Therefore, she asked, where is the need to reduce Indian culture, language and idioms to a series of footnotes?

Her second illustration focused on the need for empathy and respect while researching. She recalled an instance when a western woman felt a little upset because when she visited an Indian home, she was not shown the inner rooms of the house. Lakshmi said that she asked the woman if the people in her country took their visitors to the bedrooms. When the woman replied in the negative, Lakshmi asked her ‘in which case, how do you expect others to take you to their inner rooms?’

Her third illustration was a critique of scholars to romanticize, Indian culture. She said that a well-known scholar had claimed that Indian women had powerful religious archetypes to claim personal power. The basis for this argument she said was the mythological story that creation was triggered when the Goddess Lakshmi tickled her husband Vishnu’s feet. Lakshmi said that she asked the scholar, if the Goddess was so powerful to be able to trigger creation by tickling her husband’s feet, why did she not tickle her own feet to initiate creation?

Finally, drawing from her immense experience of recovering women’s histories, Lakshmi said it was necessary not to stereotype women in research. Women made autonomous choices and these choices cannot be slotted into preconceived notions. Her mother was born in a traditional Brahmin family and much of her life was within the framework of traditions. Yet she was very liberal in her attitudes. When her son married a Christian, she attended the church wedding and mixed freely with her daughter-in-law’s family. Her mother’s feminism was also apparent when Lakshmi lost her father. Her mother insisted that she would go to the crematorium to witness her husband’s last rites. This request was in contravention with customary sanctions. She insisted on accompanying her husband’s body to the crematorium even against the expressed injunction of the priests. The priests tried to bolster their argument by citing the Vedas. Her mother then asked the

priests to show her the religious text which dictated the custom. At the crematorium, her mother remained dry-eyed and without a tear in her eye sang a song as the funeral pyre was lit.

The programme ended with a vote of thanks to Lakshmi for her valedictory address and the all the participants for their enthusiastic participation.
