In Memoriam: Neera Desai

From the Editors

Over 2017–2019, we celebrate the lives and work of four remarkable women, Lotika Sarkar, Leela Dube, Neera Desai and Vina Mazumdar. They were founding mothers of institutions and movements and responsible for the development of women’s studies in India. Teachers, researchers, activists and mentors, all four had deeply questioning minds and did not accept hand-me down notions and ideas. As Vina Mazumdar famously put it in an essay, hers was a heritage of heresy within tradition. This was true of the others as well. From urban, middle-class enlightened homes with liberal values, they were exemplary members of a pre-Independence generation that benefited greatly from the winds of change, subtly balancing the dynamics of accepted norms with new ideas and trends. In the early 1970s, Lotika Sarkar, Leela Dube, Neera Desai and Vina Mazumdar were already involved in social, political and academic activities when they were called upon to work together on the Committee on the Status of Women in India—CSWI for short. With its report, ‘Towards Equality’, the gender lens came to stay; its publication was indeed a momentous event.

The genesis of these commemorations lies in IJGS’ celebration at turning twenty one. A day-long workshop in August 2014, entitled In Memoriam was hosted by Centre for Women’s Development Studies in collaboration with Department of Sociology, University of Delhi and Sage Publications. The packed two days were a series of dialogues around the work of these scholar-activists, the stage being set by those who had worked—and argued—with them as well as admired their indomitable spirit and sense of humour. And, in those initial years, one certainly needed liberal doses of good humour even if this was at times quirky and unexpected! Discussions were then taken forward by presentations from the younger generation. We reckoned that it was important for succeeding generations to remember what they owed to the
founding mothers: gender equality or moves towards it that is so taken for granted today was not handed to us on a platter.

Some of these lively interactions have continued in the articles—and in fact, a few have raised more issues as well. We are delighted that all the original speakers have contributed articles to IJGS. A number of them go well beyond their presentations at the 2014 workshop. In addition to these original participants, a few others have joined us too in commemorating the lives of these remarkable women.

In this number of IJGS, the third of our commemorative issues, we honour eminent sociologist and gender studies scholar and activist Neera Desai. She was closely associated with the Committee on the Status of Women in India and its report, ‘Towards Equality’, and later, with CWDS. The contributors to this issue—most of whom have worked closely with Neera Desai—look at her role in establishing the first women’s studies research centre, her work in bridging the gap between activism and academia and at her pioneering work among women in rural Maharashtra.

Malavika Karlekar and Leela Kasturi