

TWO-DAY NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON SOCIAL JUSTICE – ISSUES AND INITIATIVES

SIES College of Arts, Science and Commerce was selected to be part of institutional network for the Ford Foundation supported prestigious Programme 'Pathways to Higher Education'. This unique three year programme is being conducted as a part of Social Justice Initiative of the Higher Education Cell at the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangal in nine undergraduate colleges across three states in India (Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala). SIES Ford Pathways Cell, coordinated by Ms. Asha Gala, Associate Professor and Head of Economics Department, had organised a two – day National Conference on the theme of 'Social Justice – Issues and Initiatives' on the 18th and 19th of January, 2011. The conference primarily focused on issues with social justice vis-à-vis education, media, art and culture, the legal system, etc. and the initiatives taken by various NGOs and institutions in their bid to achieve the same. A photo exhibition, 'Vividha' was also put up on the above two days, which depicted the social diversity in Sion and Dharavi areas of Mumbai.

The conference was well-attended by various dignitaries, resource people, teachers and above all enthusiastic students. The first day of the conference began on time with the inaugural session. Mr. Mohammad Haroon Shah rendered the invocation song and was accompanied by visually challenged students Ms. Radha Bakle (Tabla) and Mr. Prakash Yadav (Harmonium). The Chief Guest Dr. R. K. Hebsur former Pro-Vice Chancellor and Deputy Director of Tata Institute of Social Sciences was welcomed by the Principal of the college, Dr. Harsha Mehta, who in her welcome-speech thanked Dr. Hebsur for agreeing to be part of such a "spontaneous cause". The conference was formally inaugurated by Dr. Hebsur, who with the Principal and the Vice – Principals, Dr. Smita Durve and Ms. Gayatri Narayan lit the auspicious lamp. Ms. Asha Gala, coordinator of the Programme gave details of the Pathways to Higher Education Programme and the theme of the conference. The guests, resource persons, office bearers of the college, parents and students who had put in special efforts for the programme were felicitated.

Ms. Arshata Mhatre (FYBA) shared her experiences in Marathi and expressed her joy of learning new things from Technology Workshop, Vividhanna, Food Festival and Exhibition under Pathways programmes. Ms. Sachita Sethi a student assistant placed in the Pathways Cell was full of emotions about her rich experience while working in the Pathways Cell. Dr. Hebsur, in his inaugural speech discussed about various aspects of injustice and the "interventionist" role that education has to play in changing the same. The Programme was attended and appreciated by Vice – Principal Ms. Saraswati R of SIES College of Commerce and Economics, Mrs. Aarati Prasad, a Senate Member of Mumbai University and Associate Professor of Economics, SIWS College, Dr. Suniti Nagpurkar Head, Economics, Vivekanand College, Prof. C. Joshi, Kirti College. The post-inaugural session was a talk by Dr. Rajam Natarajan Pillai-Publisher and Editor of Kutubnuma on 'Language as a tool of social discrimination/ justice'. Dr. Pillai regaled everybody present with her anecdotes and cited that empowerment was not just for women but for all and that the only means of achieving it was through knowledge. The session was conducted by Mrs. Lakshmi Muthukumar, Head of English Department. Ms. Gayatri Gulvadi (FYBA) proposed formal vote of thanks.

The post-lunch session was chaired by Ms. Meenakshi Venkatesh, Associate Professor and Head of Commerce Department. Ms. Nandini Krishna, a PG student from Bangalore gave a touching

account of her personal experience in overcoming a physical disability in her efforts to get educated and meet challenges of competitive world of higher education. The next speaker was Dr. Vibhuti Patel, Director, Centre for Post Graduate Studies and Research, Head of Economics, SNDT University. She traced the development of various laws passed in favour of women in India over the years and the role of NGOs in achieving social justice for women. She also spoke about different forums in Mumbai like Dilasa, Abhivyakti, Anusandhan, SNEHA, SAKHYA, etc., who work for empowerment of women. Ms. Sameera Khan, Journalist, Writer and Researcher, was the next speaker and she spoke knowledgeably on 'Going beyond the 5Ws and 1H: Role of the Indian Media in promoting Social Justice'. She pointed out how the Press "pumps up" certain issues to gain visibility and the important role media has to play in social justice.

The last session of the day was a talk on 'Social Justice for women in unorganised sector in waste management' by Ms. Jyoti Mhapsekar, President, Stree Mukti Sanghatana. Her talk was supplemented by the dynamic impactful performance of a play, 'Samte kade vatchal' by volunteers of the Stree Mukti Sanghatana. The play took account of journey of 150 years of women's struggle – a movement towards social justice and equality. Ms. Chaya Datar, a renowned social activist's special presence for the play was motivating for the participants. Mr. Bhaurao Mane, Chairman of Mahatma Education Trust Dharavi and Principal Ms. Vidya J. of M. J. College Dharavi spontaneously appreciated the programme.

The first session of the second day of the seminar was chaired by Vice – Principal Gayatri Narayan, Associate Professor, Department of Politics. Ms. Simantini Dhuru, Director AVEHI, ABACUS Project was the first speaker and spoke on how education has not been accessible to all the classes of the society and how the Right to Education Act is still an "unfulfilled promise". The second talk was delivered by Dr. Sarika Kulkarni, Trustee, Lok Kalyan Shikshan Sanstha (LKSS) on 'Enhancing quality education through Save Our School (SOS) Project'. Dr. Kulkarni spoke about the challenges faced by students of rural areas in procuring education and their endeavours to bridge the urban – rural divide. Students were inspired to join such initiatives. The Convenor of the conference Ms. Asha Gala had an interactive session with the students on decision making and the necessity to engage and empower skill development in the globalised world. She shared primary research based data on Skill Development Index. The session also included demonstration of the skills developed by students engaged in Haath Mein Sehat (HMS) Programme, which empowered students while creating awareness related to safe drinking water and sanitation among the students of Bombay Municipal Schools of Dharavi, Bandra, Lower Parel, etc. A film 'Caste Out' based on the life of Harijans of Gujarat was an eye opener to the audience.

The post-lunch session which was chaired by Ms. Leela Subramanian, Associate Professor, Department of Statistics, began with a talk by Ms. Vidya Satish, Director, SIES Institute of Comprehensive Education on 'Puppetry as an educational aid for promoting social justice'. She also gave a practical demonstration by putting up an innovative puppet show based on social issues like discrimination in education and caste system with the help of her students. The next speaker, Mr. Rajeev Panday, Advocate, Director, International Human Rights Foundation spoke on 'Role of judiciary in social justice'. He revealed the appalling fact that judiciary had very little role to play in social justice and that change can only be brought about by the common man who has to take an active part in policy making. His views initiated brainstorming discussion and

opinions of the audience. Ms. Sureka Joshi, Kirtankar and Sanskrit scholar, President, Sanskrit Bhasha Sansthan spoke on the contribution of Maharashtra's saints in educating the marginalised through traditions of kirtan and abhangas. Ms. Joshi also involved the entire audience in kirtan singing.

The conference came to an end with valedictory function. The Chief Guest for the occasion was Dr. G. G. Wankhede, Professor and Chairman, Centre for Studies in Sociology of Education, School of Social Sciences, Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Dr. Wankhede summed up the entire spirit of the conference. He spoke on 'Higher Education and Social Justice' and pointed out how the choice of higher education in India was very random and casual, the need to revise the same and stressed on how human resources can be channelized only through education. His thoughts ignited minds of many young student participants who sought the guest speaker's views on Brain drain, desirability of reservation policy, quality of education, competition in the globalised world and corruption in education.

Ms. Asha Gala then delivered the thank-you note. She thanked Ford Foundation, Higher Education Cell of CSCS, Bangalore, Dr. Tejaswini Niranjana, Lead Researcher, CSCS, Dr. Milind Wakankar, Ms. P P Sneha of CSCS, Bangalore, Dr. Sunil Abraham and Ms. Kothai of the Centre for Internet and Society, Bangalore, SIES Management, Principal and other office-bearers of the College, the participants, the resource panel, the chairpersons, the organising committee, Ms. Pallavi Rege (Stats), Mr. Abuzer Ansari (IT) and Ms. Shruti Panday (Economics) for coordinating with resource persons, the volunteers, teaching & non-teaching staff as well as the greatest strength of the institution, the students, for having made the two-day conference a grand success. She also pointed out that the conference has thrown open doors of opportunity and thought for all present which will be documented in the magazine of the Pathways Programme. Ms. Gala distributed mementos and had a pat for every back that had helped in the organisation of the conference. The conference ended on a sweet note with everybody relishing some delicious ice-cream.