

*T*he Malcolm Adiseshiah Award, instituted by the Malcolm and Elizabeth Adiseshiah Trust and administered by the Madras Institute of Development Studies, commemorates Dr. Malcolm Adiseshiah's life-long commitment to promote research of high quality in the social sciences, in the area of development studies in particular. It is also a remembrance of the encouragement he steadfastly provided to young scholars.

The first award was presented to Abhijit Vinayak Banerjee, Professor of Economics, MIT, USA.

The jury for the second award, consisting of Professor R.Radhakrishna, Director, Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai, Professor Patricia Oberoi, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi and Professor Manoranjan Mohanty, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi, has unanimously recommended that the award for 2002 should be conferred upon Professor Bina Agarwal, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi.

Professor Bina agarwal has made significant contributions to the study of gender, environment and property rights. She has advanced our understanding of their nexus with development, especially in poor countries.

Malcolm Adiseshiah Award 2002

Presented to
Bina Agarwal
Professor
Institute of Economic Growth
Delhi

**Malcolm and Elizabeth Adiseshiah Trust
Madras Institute of Development Studies**

Second Main, Gandhi Nagar, Adyar, Chennai 600 020

A Profile

Bina Agarwal, Professor in the Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi, has been unanimously recommended by the jury for the Malcolm Adiseshiah Award for Distinguished Contributions to Development studies for the year 2002. In the words of the jury Bina Agarwal is a "Scholar in feminist economics who has made pioneering contributions to the study of gender and land rights and also significantly contributed to the fields of poverty, food security and environmental studies".

Educated at the University of Delhi and at Cambridge she has established herself as a leading authority on critically important areas of development such as the environment and gender concerns. Her work is notable for its gender and political economy perspective. All her intellectual explorations resonate with empathy for the marginalized status of the poor and the disadvantaged among whom women, as a group, are generally the worst affected. This empathy is supported by incisive analysis during the course of which she moves across disciplines with felicity and with scholarly objectivity.

Professor Bina Agarwal recalls her "school holidays spent as a child in my maternal grandmother's village in Rajasthan... [which] made me especially aware of many facets of gender and caste inequalities in India" as a major formative influence. She also acknowledges the encouragement of her parents, especially her father, in her "pursuit of intellectual excellence and freedom of thought".

Professor Agarwal's engagement with the theme of environmental degradation and the appropriation of natural resources by the state as well as the privileged

few needs special mention. As early as 1983, in a paper published in *World Development*, Professor Agarwal, using wood burning stoves as an example, graphically illustrated the seriousness of the rural energy crisis and related it to the technical, economic and social characteristics which condition innovations. The need to engage with the themes of gender and social hierarchies was flagged off in this paper. From then on her work has placed gender, caste and class at the centre of the development dialogue and has helped illuminate our understanding of the macro-processes influencing India's rural environment. An outstanding publication in this genre is her appositely titled book, *Cold Hearths and Barren Slopes* which she dedicates to "all those striving to restore the balance between people and nature".

Professor Agarwal, while working within a holistic perspective, is also able to question the relevance of conventional and accepted paradigms. This is reflected in her views on eco-feminism. While welcoming the efforts of eco-feminists to theorise the link between women and nature, she draws attention to the failure of eco-feminism to differentiate women by class, caste, etc, which results in differential impact of environmental change on people.

It is with the same robust spirit that she examines the issue of land rights for women in her book, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. In what must rank as one of the most refreshingly original attempts to discuss this issue, she argues convincingly that "land has a strategic importance that other gender concerns such as employment and education appear not to have". She is, for this reason, critical of the fact that "land rights have yet to become a necessary component even of women-directed poverty alleviation programmes". She makes a powerful plea for recognizing the centrality of property rights for women but adds that such rights must necessarily include both effective ownership and control. Once again, she departs from one line of

conventional wisdom, which regards redistribution in favour of women as likely to result in loss of efficiency and decline in production. Nor is she willing to accept the view that to seek property rights for women would dilute the cause of women. In strikingly original fashion she illustrates the impermanence of a woman's class since it is essentially derived from the class status of the husband and is therefore vulnerable to alteration from divorce, desertion and widowhood.

Another example of her meticulous scholarship is her analysis of the relative improvement that took place in the property rights of women after the Hindu Succession Act became law in 1956. She concedes the improvement but points to the limited nature of the gains and this she examines against the backdrop of the larger arena of socio-political forces at work.

Professor Bina Agarwal has thus attained well-founded fame as much for her scholarly achievements as for her commitment to the cause of gender equity.

It is hardly surprising that in addition to three books and a large number of papers in journals of international repute Professor Agarwal is the recipient of several honours and accolades. Among them may be mentioned the following: A.K.Coomaraswamy Book Prize awarded by the Association for Asian Studies, USA; Edgar Graham Book Prize instituted by the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and the K.H. Batheja Award from the University of Mumbai. She is the Vice-President of the International Economic Association and the President elect of the International Association for Feminist Economics and a Governing Body member of the Global Development Network. She has been invited to teach at Harvard University and the Institute of Development Studies, at the University of Sussex, U.K. Despite the demands all these must make on her, Professor Bina Agarwal has also brought out a collection of poems titled *Monsoon* and has contributed poems to the *Kenyon Review*, *Agni Review* and *New English Poetry by Indian Women*.