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15 Apr 2009 12:30:34 PM IST

## The science, and politics, of a woman's strength

BANGALORE: Three waves of feminism have swept the globe since the nineteenth century, and have, undoubtedly, brought some revolutions in our perceptions of gender and roles of the sexes. Yet, they have not ironed out the differences, the boundary lines that have been drawn to define the territories that the male and the female are allowed to tread.

The bias between men and women that have been engendered in our consciousness and the differential treatment meted out to the sexes because of ideas that are just social constructs have always limited a woman's dreams, ambitions and freedom. But through the ages there have been women who have been brave enough to break cliches and storm conventional male bastions.

Lilavati's Daughters: The Women Scientists of India celebrates some such women who have dared to follow their heart, created a niche for themselves in the male-dominated genre of science and become inspirations for other women. This book is a collection of biographical and autobiographical essays of the lives of women scientists in India and is an initiative of the Women in Science panel of the Indian Academy of Sciences.

Science is not the only, and in a way, not even the main thread that binds these women.

It is their self-reliance, spirit and refusal to compromise which make them examples. Also, the fact that they are all Indians makes us realise that it is not just the West that is progressive and helps instil faith in our abilities.

The life of Anandibai Joshi (or Anandi Gopal) stirs heartstrings. In the late nineteenth century, when dogmas and rituals were stringent, she travelled to the US, lived in an alien culture, became the first woman doctor of India and died of TB at 22 because doctors refused to treat a woman who had crossed the borders of her own country.

Kamala Sohoni had to perform satyagraha to be accepted by CV Raman at the Tata Institute of Science, Bangalore — she had been rejected solely on gender grounds. Finally, she was the first lady CV Raman accepted in the institute and this paved the path for other women to get admission.

Science may seem an imposing subject, but the sketches by scientists are interesting personal anecdotes — crisp, short and straight-forward. There are streaks of humour also, for example, in Sudha Bhattacharya's essay. So, even if you are far, far away from the jargons of science, it is a book that you will enjoy reading both for the content as well as for its style.

There are many life stories in the book, each with its unique struggle, vision and inspiration. It is not just external factors that inhibited these scientists at different junctions of their lives. Self-doubt, dissipating confidence, dilemmas were negative forces that came from within.

Shobhana Narasimhan, who currently works at the Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research in Bangalore, writes, "There have been times when I have doubted whether I was good enough to succeed in this field that so fascinated me — either because of my own insecurities, or because of negative remarks from others, or because it seemed overly competitive." Some have had to fight death not to give up on their passion. B Vijayalakshmi raced against time to do substantial work after being diagnosed with widespread cancer of the stomach and the abdominal region. And yet others, like Mangala Narlikar, had to prioritise domestic life over career. She now writes, "In retrospect, I feel that I should have striven harder and continued my research all through." But no matter what, they are all lessons in themselves for the future generation of women to learn from.

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