



77

Dharmo rakshati rakshitaha

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*“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I...took the one less traveled by,
and that made all the difference.”*

– Robert Frost

I grew up as a shy, lonely girl in a middle class Brahmin family with seven male siblings. I obtained a high rank in high school and intermediate examinations in Science and Mathematics, but was not able to get admission to Medical College, Mysore, due to my selection of wrong subject combination (Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, instead of Life Sciences), as also perhaps because of my gender and community!

A chance meeting of my father, a practising doctor, with Prof. C. Dwarakanath, Principal, Government College of Indian Medicine, Mysore, led to my admission to this college. The syllabus integrated vital elements of Ayurveda and western medicine, along with an advanced course in Modern Science (supervised by Prof. Seebiah, a renowned physicist) and my first two years in this college ingrained the spirit of scientific enquiry, and kindled hopes of research. As a topper in the final year, I got automatic admission to the MBBS course at the Mysore Medical College. MBBS degree was totally examination oriented and gave me good clinical

experience but failed to provide any foundation for research!. The 1960's were a time of open gender bias. As one of the few girls riding a bicycle to college in Mysore city, for years I was subjected to teasing, abuse and even physical assault on the road by male students of other colleges and hooligans. When an examiner asked me my idol in science, "Marie Curie" was my prompt reply. His reaction was "Marie Curie did nothing but help her husband; how can she be your idol?" I must say that this was my first taste of male chauvinism. My desire to pursue further studies met with vehement opposition from my family and well-wishers: "Why does a "lady doctor" choose not to practise or accept a teaching job in subjects like Obstetrics & Gynaecology, Paediatrics, General Medicine etc? What is this wonderful research the girl can do in India?"

My father somehow yielded to my determination and Prof. Dwarakanath's persuasion, and allowed me to proceed to Banaras Hindu University (BHU), Varanasi, for advanced studies in 1964. The next five years at BHU saw me developing as a researcher. BHU offered a highly academic environment with excellent facilities for research, but the general atmosphere was not friendly for a young, single female researcher. A single, working woman was highly vulnerable to sexual harassment, and although I faced petty jealousy, malice and general hostility from some male faculty, my determination and the remote moral support of Prof. Dwarakanath in Delhi, Prof. K. N. Udupa, Varanasi and a few other local colleagues helped me through the first two years. My hard work at BHU resulted in two independent doctorates in two different systems of medicine, (along with valuable lessons on survival as a single working woman, in a man's world!). My first doctorate in Ayurveda, involving pioneering work on the discovery of lipid-lowering effect of Gum guggul, brought me national and international recognition. My second doctorate in Pharmacology obtained while working on an ICMR project post under the Composite Drug Research Scheme (CDRS) helped me acquire advanced knowledge and skill in experimental pharmacology and drug research. I also met here my future husband Dr. D. N. Prasad, who was the guide for my doctorate thesis in pharmacology.

I joined ICMR Delhi, as a Senior Research Officer (1969) and had rewarding experience in assisting Prof. Dwarakanath in monitoring national scale research on herbal drugs. The transfer of CDRS (along with funding) to the newly created CCRIMH (in Health Ministry) forced me to choose ICMR for its vibrant scientific ambience and autonomy.

From 1969 to 1986, under three successive directors-general at ICMR who were inspiring leaders, I was entrusted with major research and managerial responsibilities. I grew from a young researcher to a mature scientist and research coordinator, with wide exposure to central planning, policy making, designing, executing and reviewing, monitoring medical research. With scientific autonomy and encouragement and opportunities for creative work, I feel that 1971–1987 were my golden years at ICMR. However, like all workoholic women professionals, I had to struggle throughout, balancing career with domestic responsibilities.

The chief editorship of the Indian Journal of Medical Research for 18 years and two encyclopedic volumes on Medicinal Plants of India (edited by me and published in 1976, 1987) brought satisfaction and accolades, as did major HRD activities in biomedical research, organised by me. Since 1970's, my expertise on herbal drug research was in demand (in India and abroad). In 1985-86, I had the satisfaction of launching large scale national projects on herbal drugs with a disease-oriented approach.

In 1994, I was appointed Director General of the ICMR (till 1997). This is a coveted post for all medical scientists and while the appointment, of the first “woman DG” was hailed in media, in some ways this turned out to be an ordeal due to a set of adverse circumstances. Although I had support from senior bureaucrats in the Health Ministry and the majority of scientific community, apart from a small group of ICMR scientists as well as international experts agencies, I could achieve only moderate success in taking great strides for ICMR. The root of hostility was not my gender, but perhaps my strict adherence to *dharma* (moral/ethical principles), without compromising scientific autonomy/dignity of ICMR. Still, I could achieve a major landmark in constituting first Central Committee to draft comprehensive ethical

guidelines on all aspects of human research in India (1995–97).

What helped sustain my career? I can list discipline, hard work, commitment, strict moral/ethical principles, teamwork, faith in a higher power, as well as music, meditation/prayer, long walks as stress-busters along with a sense of humour.

“Dharmo Rakshati Rakshitaha”

*(If you protect your Dharma
(ie., duty with a moral responsibility),
in turn, your Dharma will protect you)*