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Building a career despite family pressures

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I was born in Calcutta, and I am my parents' only child. I attended Bagbazar Multipurpose Government School which was close to our house. Influenced by the environment in which I grew up, my father was a Ph.D. in physics and was a physics teacher – from childhood, I was motivated to build a career in physics.

My family encouraged my school and college education. I did my bachelor's from Presidency College, Calcutta, and my masters from Calcutta University. However, they were rather conservative and not very comfortable with the idea of a girl going to a far-off place for study. This was one of the primary reasons for my staying in Calcutta after finishing my master's degree and joining the Ph.D. program at a research Institute in Calcutta. Afterwards I realized the importance of going out, seeing the world and broadening my vision. I was greatly influenced by my colleague, who later became my husband. I fought a lot to convince my parents about the importance of going abroad for post-doctoral studies. In middle-class Bengali families it was not common for a girl to stay on her own in distant places.

For post-doctoral studies I went to Paris. In the beginning it was not easy for me to be alone in a foreign city where I knew nobody and could hardly speak the language. For the first time in my life I had to do everything by myself! Nevertheless I was determined not to give up. While I did well academically, I gradually became unwell and had to move to Max-Planck Institute in Stuttgart, where my husband was a post-doctoral fellow. I was a Max-Planck Fellow on suggestion by Prof. Ole Andersen who, after my husband, has been a big source of academic inspiration for me. The decision to come back to India was also not easy. My husband got a job offer and decided to come back to India, and I came back primarily because of his decision. I consider this the most difficult part of my life.

I joined the Indian Institute of Science as a research associate but fortunately, within a few months, I got an offer from the research institute in Kolkata where I am presently working for an independent position. There was constant pressure from my family to take a job in the same city where my husband is, but I felt it was important to have my own independent research career. With my husband working in Mumbai, and me in Kolkata cities separated by about 2000 km, over the years this created severe problems which I could only overcome with my mental strength. But on the other hand, I feel I have achieved many things in my academic life including professional recognition. I built up a group, which I could not have done otherwise. To have a successful scientific career, it is important to be mentally strong to overcome family barriers.