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A woman ecologist in India

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As one of the first women to become a professor of ecology in India, I was able to witness changes in the status of women ecologists in the developing world. I became an ecologist through a fortunate set of circumstances. I had an early connection with nature due to my father who was an amateur naturalist and wildlife photographer, and this gave me a spirit of adventure and curiosity about the life around us. I was also privileged in being able to do my doctoral research under the guidance of Dr. Salim Ali, who was an eminent ornithologist and one of those rare individuals with a passion for enquiry and an absolute sense of integrity and fairness. I was a young woman in my early twenties launched into a male dominated field, where women were conspicuous by their absence. My interest in ecological research was not taken too seriously by many of my colleagues. However, Salim Ali gave me unstinting support, completely disregarding gender as being of any significance to research involving fieldwork. This gave me the courage to carry on regardless of opposition or indifference.

Looking back, I can see that having support from established scientists played a very important role in my life. After my Ph.D., I was a postdoctoral fellow in the United States for over

seven years. I was associated with reputed institutions such as the Smithsonian Institution and Harvard University, among others, and had the opportunity to carry out field research in North and Central America. I received support from many outstanding scientists: this is what helped me to get established in science. This underlines the importance of mentorship in science.

When I returned to India to take up a faculty position at Pondicherry University after being abroad for 7 years. I faced an academic life that was quite overwhelming in its brutality. However, there were many positive aspects, which helped me pursue research and teaching with interest and enthusiasm. I can identify some reasons for the difficulties I faced. Firstly, the caste system is still alive and doing well. As a proof, most of the elite institutions are dominated by the upper castes, and although statistics are lacking, caste-based nepotism is very much a part of academic recruitment procedure. In the Universities, however, because of reservation, there is a greater diversity of castes. Gender is the other issue: women have a subservient role in society and this is translated into a subservient role in the workplace. As in Western countries, women are not as much a part of academic networks, which are important in furthering careers. Social status is further undermined if body language, dress code and hairstyle do not conform to tradition, particularly in the conservative south.

How I survived and achieved a fairly successful career seems a mystery! It is a cliché but India is truly the land of paradoxes. The Indian experience has given me courage and fortitude to pursue my goals regardless of opposition and lack of peer support. I also was in a field of science that does not require infrastructure and laboratory support. Many of my colleagues in the lab-based sciences are languishing due to lack of basic infrastructure and administrative support to carry out their research. I had the good fortune of having a supportive family atmosphere, good students and international recognition. I have trained many students and many of the women have distinguished careers of their own. Female ecologists are well accepted by the rural population. They usually get extra support and in more than 20 years of teaching, we never had an incident of violence towards students even in the

remotest places in the jungle. Wherever I travel in the world, I have the good luck to meet up with at least one of the former students of my Department, who have been carrying out interesting and innovative projects.

Ecologists have an important role to play in improving the quality of life in India, where environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity is pervasive. Young ecologists are now taking the lead and with their vision and intelligence, are making changes both small and large across the landscape that is India. This is the hope for the future.