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Waiting for sparks

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When I was in tenth standard, our chemistry classes used to be held in the laboratory itself. Our chemistry teacher would write equations on the blackboard proceed to demonstrate those experiments right away. Also very often, she would cite examples from daily life. I clearly remember our visits to the nearby soap factory and the rubber factory. My elder sister and I shared this excitement in chemistry and we often messed up the kitchen and dining table with our “experiments”. All this must have contributed to an increased interest in Science and consequently that showed up brilliantly in the results and naturally guided me towards mathematics, physics and chemistry in the pre-degree (what was the Plus two those days). A turn of events forced us to relocate from the big city to our ancestral village (we “children” were not a part of the decision-making process.) What can a college in a village offer? My sister and I were utterly disappointed and resigned to the fact that this would be the end of our foray into science.

But surprisingly this was not to be. This undergraduate college, hardly two years into existence in a nondescript village near Ottappalam, in Kerala, turned us forever towards science in general and chemistry in particular. To be sure the college lacked

infrastructure and facilities, but it made up for all that with its dedicated faculty. We were lucky to have excellent teachers in chemistry who taught us beyond the text books. Exceptional among them, KRJ, introduced us to the concept of “Research” which to us then was as exciting as a detective story. But the best was yet to come. KRJ put in all his powers of influence to coax, cajole and threaten a team of six of us to prepare for the Science Talent Exam conducted by National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT). Despite our skepticism we were driven by his enthusiasm and conviction. He was up in the air when all of us qualified for the interview at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bangalore and thrilled beyond words when three of us were awarded the National Science Talent Search (NSTS) scholarship.

From then on there has been no looking back. The scholarship provided the roadmap to postgraduation and PhD and prepared me for a career in science. In retrospect, in my life a mentor has made all the difference. KRJ taught us to overlook the deficiencies of the college, trained me to look beyond the boundaries of the village and focus on the pursuit of knowledge.

The NSTS came with several bonus points. The most stimulating were the book grant and the annual month long summer school. Both these served to sustain my interest and excitement in science. The book grant was a great incentive. I got to own classic textbooks in chemistry, some of which still adorn my home library.

The summer schools were fun too. We saw research at close quarters because these were held at institutions like IISc, National Chemical Laboratory (NCL), National Physical Laboratory (NPL), etc. We had lecture in the morning and experiments during the afternoon. During a summer school stint at IISc, we had the most memorable physical chemistry classes by Prof. AKN Reddy. We were introduced to looking up journals, following protocols, conducting experiments and analysing the results. Of course most of it was beyond us, but that didn't matter we got a great introduction to research!

I couldn't attend all the summer schools; the student unrest in the 1970's and consequent postponement of examina-

tions often prevented us from participating. Summer schools brought us close to scholars from different parts of India and the cultural evenings helped us forge great friendships!

Decades have gone by and my scientific career has taken me from academia to governmental R&D, and now finally to industry. When I do a stock taking, I find not many from our NSTS group stayed in science for long; but the few that did are firmly entrenched and still facilitate the propagation of scientific temper and culture. It is important not to make this into a number game; even at 0.1percent return it is indeed a great effort.

I benefited from the NSTS immensely, as have several of my juniors from that little village college. Let us take such schemes to every nook and corner of India; may be there is someone waiting for a spark!