



73

Follow your heart

Renuka Ravindran

I went to a very ordinary school – the Presentation Convent, in Vepery, Madras (now Chennai). The Anglo-Indian High School syllabus at that time allowed one to choose special subjects for the class twelve examination. I chose geometry and trigonometry. Our teacher had just rejoined work after taking leave for over ten years to raise a family. She used to struggle to solve the problems in Loney, the text prescribed for trigonometry. These were delightful problems from the Tripos examination. Whenever she was unable to solve a problem, she would say, “Let us ask Renuka to do it.” That was enough to send me into a tizzy, working for hours until I had solved the problem.

More than school, though, it was the environment at home that was exciting. At the dining table, the topics of conversation were usually about why heavier-than-air bodies could fly or whether the period of a simple pendulum depended on the weight of the bob or what the special features of diesel engines are. This was a time before television had invaded homes. Since my father could quote pages of poetry, we children would spend entire vacations learning the 75 verses of Fitzgerald’s translation of “Omar Khayyam” or Browning’s “The Pied Piper of Hamelin”. We read a lot of classics, including D.H. Lawrence and the Bronte sisters. I

am glad that I was exposed to subjects other than mathematics – in fact, the B.Sc. syllabus of Madras University required us to do two minor subjects from the Arts – I chose politics and philosophy.

When I joined the Indian Institute of Science as a research student, the major influence on me was that of my research guide, Prof. P. L. Bhatnagar. He was a towering personality in every sense of the word – academically and physically. He had a passionate fondness for mathematics as a whole and it was easy to imbibe that from him. His work was everything to him; he worked round the clock and thought, lived and dreamt mathematics. He had undergone spinal surgery and could hardly walk, but that did not stop him from giving lectures. He always remarked that if one did not find the topic of one's own lectures interesting and exciting, how could one expect students to listen and learn from it. His enthusiasm was infectious.

Once I joined the faculty at I.I.Sc., there were many occasions to interact with scientists from all over the world. From being a student, I slowly graduated to teaching and guiding others. Teaching has always been a pleasant task.

What is it that made me take up a career in science, when the family had a tradition of appearing for competitive examinations and going into government service? I can only say that from my early school days I had a passionate fondness for mathematics. Here was an area where the proofs were precise and unambiguous. There was clarity and precision at every step. What could be more enchanting!

As a woman, has it been easy to pursue a career in science? I have never felt disadvantaged just because I am a woman. I had family backing and support and a most encouraging husband. Certainly, it was not easy to have a wife who spent years abroad, who was not at home very often, who was not a traditional housewife. How many men are willing to acknowledge that a woman's career is as important as their own? Of course times have changed now, but forty years ago, it required a lot of understanding and I am ever grateful for that.

If I were asked for a few words to young women setting

out on a career in science, I would say “Follow your heart. If you are convinced that you must take up a research career in science, do so. Otherwise, there are many other options open to today’s young woman.”