



83

A matter of chance, environment and inclination

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Why did I opt for science subjects in school, and choose a career in science? Perhaps the best answer would be ‘Chance, Environment and Inclination’.

Here I am, considered to be a professional woman scientist, working towards understanding the biology of the malaria parasite and the challenges put up by the same. I have enjoyed a reasonably fulfilling scientific career without having to compromise on my family front - husband and two children. However, at three points in my life it almost did not happen.

The first and the most difficult hurdle was when my father objected to my going to Bombay (TIFR) for Ph.D. “A corrupt city” he insisted - “Really bad for young girls. Stay with us at Calcutta, and I will make sure that you can join whoever you wish to in this city for your Ph.D.” Time to get out of the direct influence of such ‘protective and proactive father’ - I thought.

Next - when I appeared for my Ph.D. interview at TIFR, Bombay, one of the chemistry professors offered me a lecturer’s

job at Sophia College - a 'permanent job with twice as much salary' as my fellowship at TIFR would be! I was tempted, but was pulled back by Katie Daruwala, my elder sister's friend, my guide and philosopher at that point of time. "You will get plenty of opportunities to teach in a college after your Ph.D. If you qualify for Ph.D. in TIFR and not take it up, you will regret for your entire life" she said. I did join TIFR for Ph.D., but I do not quite know what I missed! A comfortable permanent job would certainly have led to a less stressful life. However, I guess that may not have been as exciting.

A major dilemma is faced by a 'professional' woman when she wants to start a family, and I was no exception. I was 32 years old, and we realized that we needed to start a family - then or never. At that stage, my husband Dinesh had just joined Research Triangle Park in USA, while I was at New York University Medical Centre, doing very well with two science papers published on the then 'hot' and 'sizzling' recombinant DNA technology applied on the malaria parasite. I did not find suitable groups to move to and almost gave up my career in malaria. However, Nigel Godson (my boss at that time) and his friend Mike Parkhouse, organized that I should work in the immunology group headed by Ron Corley at the Duke University Medical Center. They figured that some training in immunology would help me in my future ambitions on studying malaria. At that point my knowledge of immunology was nearly zero, and I marvel at the fact that Ron Corley accommodated me in his very classical immunology group.

Having my career in jeopardy thrice in my life (not to mention small perturbations - when transiently one feels like giving up everything and quitting), I have learnt one main lesson. Next day will be better and is likely to bring in fresh opportunities. I would like to tell all - please do not interrupt your career for any reason. It is better to be clear that on certain days you just *have* to be at work, and therefore in case of an emergency, your spouse should take leave. Do this from day one. If you take a break and look after your home affairs for a few years or even some months at a stretch, then it gets difficult to change the norm, and catch up professionally. Children, get used to you being at home, and be-

lieve me - children; spouse and parents can blackmail you emotionally very effectively. As a scientist – stay with scientific practicality, and do not give in to such emotions.

How did I imbibe/learn such tactics? I have been lucky to have had huge support from various quarters. I was born in Calcutta in a typical Bengali family, but was brought up in Delhi. I studied Science in Lady Irwin School and then pursued chemistry honours in Delhi University. I was taught by some excellent teachers. Dr. V.M. Khanna, our Physical Chemistry teacher in B.Sc., gave us tough assignments with unusual problems, and subjected us to open-book tests quite early. I am most indebted to him for my foundations in science. Amongst my family, my father may have objected to my going to Mumbai, but he was all for higher education and a career. My husband has been a tower of strength and support. He actively discouraged me from traditional 'homely' activities such as cooking and encouraged and tolerated my taste and talent with other hobbies such as photography or gardening. My elder sister indoctrinated me into modern biology and egged me to pursue science. Without her I may have been working in some chemical factory, perhaps earning much more money, but deprived of the thrills of biology research and discovery.

Reflecting back on my career, I know that circumstances have played a major role in my life. Balancing a home and a job is not easy for a woman - even now. However rational or scientific a couple may be, the worries of running the household falls on (and are accepted by) the women. Since women multi-task well, they go on with their jobs and worries at the same time, while men concentrate on their jobs. To have women put in their best in their jobs, it is necessary to take care of the family and those worries. Until that happens, the representation of women in demanding professions will continue to be low. It is important to note that the norms for excellence are defined by experts (historically men), who may not be sensitized to inherent gender differences. By having more women in policy making bodies, and more men involved in caring for home and children, hopefully the norms for an excellent professional life will even out for the two genders.