

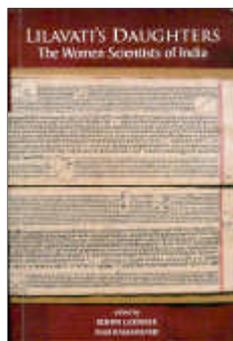
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Forgotten daughters

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Of the lives and careers of more than 100 women scientists of our country from the Victorian Era to our own times...

Lilavati's Daughters: The Women Scientists of India, edited by Rohini Godbole and Ram Ramaswamy, Indian Academy of Sciences, p.368, 2008.



Next time you are at a social gathering, try this little experiment. Ask friends and family to name a female scientist. Most will come up with the name of Nobel laureate Marie Curie; some may mention the unheralded Rosalind Franklin. No one seems to know of accomplished Indian women in science. Our textbooks don't speak of such pioneering figures; newspapers rarely run profiles of present day female researchers.

This anthology of essays featuring nearly one hundred Indian women scientists — from the Victorian era to our times — fills a void then. Every chapter is the story of a woman scientist of India. Contemporary women give first-person accounts of what brought them to the field of research and what keeps them going. Amateur writers present the narratives of memorable personalities who are no more. Their stories are compelling even when the writing lacks finesse.

The title is a miniature story in itself. Lilavati was the daughter of the renowned 12th-century mathematician, Bhaskaracharya. In his classical treatise, he addresses problems in algebra, geometry, and discrete mathematics to his playful, doe-eyed daughter. We don't know if Lilavati became a mathematician herself but the fact that her accomplished father deemed her worthy of solving these complex problems indicates that she must have been brilliant. The women in *Lilavati Daughters* are all inheritors of her intellectual legacy.

Inspiring example

Nowadays, scores of students go abroad to study science but imagine the incredible journey of Anandibai Joshi, the first Hindu woman to obtain a medical degree in the United States in 1886. Back then, America must have seemed no less distant than the moon. Alone in an alien land, this 19-year-old stuck to her vegetarianism, her saris, and a resolve to qualify herself to serve her female compatriots who would sooner die than allow a male doctor to physically examine them. But the severe winters took a toll on her health, and like the mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan, she eventually succumbed to tuberculosis. Her story is presented as a first person narrative.

Readers may know that Sudha Murthy, chairperson of Infosys Foundation, challenged the House of Tatas rule of not employing female engineers at their factory. But if shop floors were not considered fit workplaces for women, in an earlier era, laboratories too were deemed inappropriate spaces for them, we learn. One person who resisted the entry of young women researchers into the prestigious Indian Institute of Science was the director Sir C.V. Raman himself. The essay “The Scientist Lady” tells us of the chemist Kamala Sohonie who staged a Gandhi-style protest outside the Nobel laureate’s office in 1933 till she was admitted as a research student at the institute.

Ridiculous convention

More than one person from the post-independence era mentions years of separation from their spouses because of an inability to find appropriate work in the same city. This seems particularly true of couples in science. Unfortunately, the unwritten rule, which states that spouses should not be appointed in the same division, is faithfully followed in research institutes in our country, says Dr. D. Balasubramanian, President, Indian Academy of Sciences. The essay on the gifted chemist Darshan Ranganathan who was not offered a faculty position at IIT, Kanpur because her husband was a professor there, makes us livid at a callous system.

This timely anthology is a long-overdue acknowledgement of the struggles and triumphs of women scientists in our midst. A wider range of career choices are open to bright young people today but scientists are still vital for any knowledge-based economy. Girls who want that life in science will find many role models here. Every school and college library in India should order copies of the book right away. But readers don’t have to be women, scientists, or someone who is keen on science to enjoy the best of these inspiring tales.

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