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Be not sad a rose bush has thorns; be glad a thorn bush has roses

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People often ask me whether I have found it difficult being a woman in science. If I were to reply without thinking, I would say, “Well, not really”. But then the question could be put differently: “Do you think if certain things had been different, life would have been easier for you as a woman in science?” To that, the answer would be “Yes, of course!” In this brief essay, I have tried to convey some of my thoughts and personal experiences related to this topic.

Except for a brief period of four years, I have always studied in co-educational institutions. Being physically well built, I could compete on equal terms with boys in sports, and this, perhaps, enabled me to think of boys (or men) as equals and not as superiors. I find many girls turn shy or embarrassed when they have to make a point or argue with boys; this, I feel, largely arises due to limited exposure to boys, which makes girls think of them as different and perhaps unreasonable creatures. Added to this is the attitude ingrained in them by society, by peers, and by members of the family, that girls should be subdued, calm,

non-aggressive, seen but not heard, and should put others before self.

Right from childhood, my brother and I were encouraged to read a lot, to question, to gather knowledge. My father, himself a scientist and my mother, a housewife – but exceptionally well-read and well-informed, both took pains to teach us. From an early age, there was no doubt in my mind that I would pursue a career in research.

I salute my parents as they were quite different from their brothers and sisters. They brought up their two children – my brother and me – in pretty much the same manner, without discrimination. They never made me feel inferior, nor did they stop me from doing anything because I was a girl. At a time and in a family environment, where girls would be “married off” on graduation, I was encouraged to pursue higher studies, and, more unthinkable, I stayed in a hostel, and in a predominantly male institution at that! After studies, I took up a job, and my parents shielded me from relatives who were aghast that I had taken up a job, and was still unmarried.

While I was often blissfully unaware of discrimination or a biased environment, when I now look back, several instances stand out. One of my earliest memories is of primary school at the age of five or six. It was after a prize-distribution ceremony at the close of term; I had received a few prizes as I had scored the highest marks in several subjects. My friend, a boy, who had stood second in class, was scolded severely by his parents: “Aren’t you ashamed? You have allowed a girl to score more than you!” The import of this did not strike me then, but now when I look back, I wonder how many parents drill into the heads of their impressionable infant sons that they are inherently superior to girls.

The other event that is still fresh in memory is a comment by a close friend of mine, a male classmate in B.Sc., in a college in Mumbai. When I got admission to M.Sc. at I.I.T., Mumbai (and he had not), his spontaneous remark was, “You have spoiled the career of a man. Why do you girls want to study at I.I.T., especially when career has no meaning for women? You have merely wasted a seat in I.I.T. – and deprived a boy of it.” I was shocked by

this viciousness and by his views about the inevitable future for a woman.

My first job was at B.A.R.C., Mumbai. I must say that in the scientific field I have not found any serious discrimination by my colleagues. I have found three kinds of male colleagues. The first, usually elderly, tend to make decisions for you: "Oh, it's an out-station conference, how can she go there to present a paper?" I used to bristle at this till I realized that these remarks were well-meaning, protective gestures. Then there are those who intentionally make things difficult, to prove that as a woman I am unable to do certain things. Finally, the younger generation, who have been exposed to increasing female participation in school, college, professional courses, and the workplace. Such persons, especially those with working wives, are more understanding, and tend to treat us more as equals. Fortunately, their tribe is increasing!

A major decision that I had to make was to relocate upon marriage. This was a very difficult decision. It meant that I had to leave an excellent scientific group, and give up a stable job, especially when things were looking very good for me at work. However, I was more worried that I would provide yet another example of the widely prevalent perception that it is unwise to hire a woman employee because she will quit upon marriage, or become irregular when children are born, and that one cannot expect long-term commitment to a job from a woman. Torn between two opposing desires, I finally took the step of quitting my job at B.A.R.C., Mumbai and moving to Bangalore. Fortunately, it so turned out that while I moved out of Mumbai, I did not move out of science. I continued research, although it meant changing my field of study several times. I worked in seismology at Gauribidanur for some time, and then joined the Raman Research Institute to set up an optics laboratory.

Now when I look around, I find that men also switch jobs although for different reasons; they mainly move on to ones that are more lucrative, or where a career rise seems more likely. Attrition is now the order of the day. What pleases me most now is that often, among young couples, the wife's job is a major

consideration in deciding where to settle down.

Life has its ups and downs. A career woman in India has perhaps more downs than ups. But two proverbs have often encouraged me to plough through difficulties – one of these is the title of this essay. The other says that it is darkest before dawn.

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