Achievements and Struggles of Women Scientists in India

Women Scientists in India: Lives, Struggles and Achievements,
By

Recently the Google Arts and Culture portal added an online collection titled “Women Scientists of India”[1] to pay tribute to seventeen women Fellows of the Indian Academy of Sciences (IASc) who have passed away. While this collection was obtained from the IASc publication “Lilavati’s Daughters”,[2] another publication comes to our mind depicting the lives and achievements of Indian women scientists, namely, “Scientifically Yours: Selected Indian Women Scientists”.[3] In “Lilavati’s Daughters” the women scientists presented their memoirs and narrated how did they overcome socio-cultural barriers to pursue their scientific or academic career. The western education they received during their schooling and graduate studies led to a definite career pathway, which was a rarity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, things got improved after India’s independence due to the establishment of various colleges for the women or creating space for women students in the general degree colleges and universities. Women’s entry in the science stream was also ensured a sustained supply of human resources which would teach science subjects in schools, colleges and universities. Some of them got absorbed into the scientific laboratories built around the university systems, national laboratories and private sectors. However, medical practitioners received higher societal recognition, as they provided humanitarian services to the womenfolk in the erstwhile conservative society. The key scientists while overcoming gender bias in the twentieth centu-
In terms of leadership roles played by the women scientists, Asima became the first woman President of the Indian Science Congress Association (ISCA), while Sneha Bhargava became the first woman director in the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) and Satyavati G. Vedanti became the first woman Director General in the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). The book also includes biographies of India’s pioneer woman biotech-entrepreneur Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw; present Deputy Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO) Soumya Swaminathan; first Indian woman Fellow of the Third World Academy of Sciences (TWAS, Italy) Bimla Buti; first woman member of Indian Antarctic Expedition (1983) Sudipta Sengupta; first woman Fellow of IASc (1935) and Indian National Science Academy (1957) EK Janaki Ammal; Padma Vibhushan awardees physician Captain Laxmi Sahgal (also a freedom fighter) and cardiologist Sivaramakrishna Iyer Padmavati; and many other pioneers in their respective fields.

The author compiles a useful Appendix (p. 461-471) on contributions of foreign missionary women doctors in India, listing 26 women physicians, who provided the humanitarian services in India during late 19th and early 20th centuries. Index III (p. 479-492) gives a ready reckoner on outstanding achievements of 77 women scientists and physicians. With a plethora of information made available, this book will undoubtedly inspire young students to become active STEM (Science, technology, engineering and mathematics) researchers in their respective fields. The book’s attempt to portray women’s participation in STEM research in India will also help our understanding of the socio-cultural barriers and challenges women face while choosing a career of scientific research. The lives and achievements recorded in a single volume are very praiseworthy. However, the author should consider expanding this volume for the inclusion of the young achievers.

REFERENCES


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