

Conference Report

A Seminar – An Experience

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It was on the fine morning of 10th February 2018 that my parents and I walked into the conference hall of Birla Industrial and Technological Museum (BITM), Kolkata. I've never known what a conference is but it was Prof. Anil Kumar Ghosh who suddenly asked my father one day, if he would accompany me to a certain seminar. So there we were. We were greeted warmly and on entering the conference hall were given a file, a pen and a conference pad.

The seminar to be held was on “**The Icon of Science Personality: Asima Chatterjee**” organized by Institute of Science, Education and Culture (ISEC) in collaboration with BITM.

As the clock struck twelve Prof. Anil Kumar Ghosh, President, ISEC delivered the inaugural address. Dr. E. Islam, Director, BITM was not present owing to other engagement. Prof. Anil Kumar Ghosh welcomed the galaxy of distinguished speakers, budding scientists, honourable invitees and guests – thanking them all for their response to the seminar. The keynote address was given by Prof. Dulal Mukhopadhyay (President, Indian Chemical Society and Retired Professor, Chemistry Department, Calcutta University). He spoke about the motherly nature of the renowned chemist Mrs. Asima Chatterjee. Once he was called to her presence for delay in a class. However on knowing that his mother died at an early age she made him sit down and gave him the sweets meant for her daughter, Juli.

After a short tea break session-I started at 1.00pm chaired by Prof. Gandhi Kar, Professor and Ex-Dean

of Natural and Mathematical Sciences, Department of Chemistry, Presidency University. The speakers were Prof. Manas Chakrabarty, Secretary, Asima Chatterjee Foundation and Prof. Juli Banerjee, daughter of Asima Chatterjee, Retired Professor, Chemistry Department, Calcutta University. They were to speak on “A Humble Tribute of Prof. Mrs. Asima Chatterjee: A Legendary Chemist of India” and “Life and Works of Asima Chatterjee: respectively. Their accounts were quite overlapping. However, Prof. Manas Chakrabarty came up with a power point presentation which had pictures of many tributes to Prof. Asima Chatterjee including some of her photographs.

Asima Mukherjee was born on 23rd September 1917 to Dr. Indranarayan Mukherjee and Smt. Kamala Devi. She had a younger brother, Sarasiranjan Mukherjee who became a doctor like her father. As a child she suffered frequently from fever. To recover her health she went to her paternal grandmother's house near Tarakeshwar. It was here that she studied in the village 'Pathshala' and acquired the love for nature. At the age of seven, she was admitted to Bethune Collegiate School. A brilliant student from the beginning, Asima Mukherjee after the ISC examinations opted for Chemistry (Hons) at Scottish Church College. In spite of the objections raised by the elders of her orthodox Hindu family, it was the sheer determination of her mother that enabled her to study as per her own choice. After that Asima Mukherjee joined the post-graduate department of chemistry, Calcutta University and started her project on coumarins. Her first paper was published in 1937.

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In the year 1940, she joined the Lady Brabourne College, Department of Chemistry. In 1944, Asima Mukherjee obtained the Doctorate of Science (D Sc) from Calcutta University becoming the first Indian woman to do so from an Indian university. The same year, she joined the Chemistry Department, Calcutta University as honorary lecturer. In 1945, she was married to Dr. Baradaranjan Chatterjee and became **Mrs. Asima Chatterjee**. In 1947 she got a post-doctoral fellowship to carry out research in USA. Here, she came in close contact with Nobel laureate Linus Pauling and several others. After her return she rejoined Lady Brabourne College as the Head of the Chemistry Department and continued to be honorary lecturer in Calcutta University. She began her research on alkaloids and coumarins.

In 1967 Mrs. Chatterjee lost her father and her husband within four and a half months and was hospitalized due to a massive heart attack. In 1969 she undertook the herculean task of re-editing and compiling the volumes of "*Bharater Vanousodhi*" and in 1988 took part in forming its English version "The Treatise on Indian Medicine". She was also a driving force behind the establishment of National Research Institute of Ayurvedic Drug Development under the Ministry of Ayush, Government of India.

Mrs. Asima Chatterjee was a member of Rajya Sabha from February 1982 to May 1990 and was attached to the Ramakrishna Math and Missions. She received several awards and prizes including the Padma Bhushan in 1975 and was also the first lady recipient (from science) of the prestigious Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Memorial Award. She was reverentially called 'Master' by her students. Idol of science, Mrs. Asima Chatterjee passed away on 22nd November 2006.

After the lunch break, Session-II commenced chaired by Prof. C K Ghosh, Retired Professor, Chemistry Department, Calcutta University. The speaker, Prof. Nitin Chattopadhyay, Chemistry Department, Jadavpur University was going to speak on "Development of Potential Strategies from Simple Ideas" while speaker Prof. Asis Dey, Retired Professor, Chemistry Department, Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science was to speak on "Prof. Asima Chatterjee: An Outstanding Scientist and Teacher". Prof. Nitin Chattopadhyay hinted at simple ideas like micelle formation and went on to explain mechanisms of drugs. Prof. Asis Dey highlighted the various achievements of Mrs. Asima Chatterjee pointing out that she achieved the heights in science without sophisticated machinery and equipments.

The vote of thanks was given by Prof. Santanu Das, Secretary, ISEC. After a few people had sung songs, suddenly I was asked to speak. Totally baffled I went up to the dias. I confess it was not very easy to speak in front of so many learned people, but I did. I remember saying that in class IX, our chemistry teacher Gargi aunty was the first one who opened the horizons of science with fun. Talking about mixtures she said that it was the commonplace '*jhalmuri*'! Moreover she made us appreciate chemical observation through anecdotes. I also noted that India is a place where goddesses like Saraswati and Lakshmi are worshipped alongside the barbaric acts of female foeticide and discrimination towards girls. I ended by saying that without her mother's support or her unflinching courage Mrs. Asima Chatterjee could not have been what she is and we would have lost one of the heroes of science.

Indeed, the first seminar in my life filled me with so much thought, experience and inspiration.