BioSpectrum the business of Bio & Health Sciences ASIA EDITION

IKP's Deepanwita Chattopadhyay: Women, open up your mind

March 4, 2013 | Influencers | By BioSpectrum Bureau



We were a large family with my parents, seven brothers and sisters, and our dog. Life was always busy - there was no way one could get bored - with studies, dance, music, painting, playing, reading aloud, chatting, gardening or simply playing innocent pranks on each other. If we asked anything to our father, he always said, "Mother knows best. Always ask her what to do". And we did. On the dining table, we discussed our day's exploits in school or college and sought her views. I was lucky to go to one of best schools and colleges in India - South Point High School, Presidency College and Science College in Kolkata and IIT Delhi.

Read inspirational stories of women leaders in life sciences:

- Dr Kanyawim Kirtikara, executive director, Biotec, Thailand
- Dr Anu T Singh, director, R&D, Dabur Research Foundation, India
- Dr Jennifer Holmgren, CEO, LanzaTech, New Zealand
- Video message from women leaders in bioscience

Ã?Â

My first job was as an assistant lecturer at the Electrical and Electronics Engineering Department of BITS, Pilani. While I enjoyed teaching, I realized most students don't come with an understanding of science and math, and it is too late to develop that in college. I wanted to do something which had more impact. So, I left BITS Pilani after one semester and devoted my time to working on non-formal science teaching with NGOs. This was a huge learning experience for me and I got the opportunity to know the real India while working with NGOs in Delhi, Almora and Madhubani districts in northern and eastern India. Though it is oft quoted, I would still like to quote Mahatma Gandhi: 'You must be the change you wish to see in the world'.

I love taking up new challenges and try to understand various aspects of social development. So, when I got a chance to work with ICICI Advisory Services Division on telecom reforms in India, I could not refuse the offer, and in a queer twist of fate, one fine morning in October 1994, I found myself shifting gears from my academic and NGO life to the corporate world. It was the

heady times of telecom reforms in India, and I consider myself lucky to be able to witness the process of liberalization and the impact of the telecom revolution from close quarters. I learnt about the various aspects of technology deployment, forecast and business planning, and thoroughly enjoyed my work at the telecom advisory at ICICI.

With telecom reforms well-entrenched by 1999, just as I was thinking, 'So now what', I got this offer to spearhead the ICICI Knowledge Park project, now called IKP Knowledge Park, and moved with my family from Mumbai to Hyderabad. This was the real turning point in my life. I could see how all the learnings in the various phases of my journey could now be distilled to build something concrete, to give shape to a dream of Mr N Vaghul, the then chairman of ICICI Bank and the chairman of IKP. I am really grateful that I got the guidance and support of some very eminent people on the board, such as Mr Vaghul, Dr Bala Manian, Dr Ashok Ganguly, Dr R A Mashelkar, Mr R Rajamani and Dr M K Bhan.

The IKP Knowledge Park was set up as a classical science park in a 200-acre campus with laboratory buildings where companies would lease space to conduct innovative R&D. Our initial companies were mid-sized Indian pharma companies, and we depended on lab rent to build sustainability. As IKP began evolving from a pure play space and rental model to an incubation and ecosystem development model, I had real difficulty convincing academic institutions, other stakeholders and even some of my board members about this shift. It took several years of dedicated work and perseverance of the entire IKP team before people recognized that innovation ecosystem and entrepreneurship development was our primary agenda.

Ã?Â

I have been with IKP from the first day of its operations. For the first few months, I was overseeing the project from ICICI. Then, I joined it as the CEO from August 1, 2001. A research park was a new concept in India, and I knew that I had to set the benchmarks and develop a strategy to build a sustainable and profitable organization, while maintaining the not-for-profit innovation ecosystem development agenda. That too in the life sciences sector. I think we have been fairly successful and worked with over 72 companies directly and many more indirectly, and have built an innovation ecosystem with companies as large as DuPont and US Pharmacoepia and as tiny as one-or-two person start-ups. This, I feel, has been my contribution to IKP and the science park and incubation movement in India.

Mr Vaghul is one of my role models. He played a significant role in the way he built ICICI as a value-based organization and envisioned the creation of institutions such as Crisil, the first Indian VC (TDICI/ICICI Venture), Institute for Financial Management and Research, IKP, Pratham and others in India, his philosophy and attitude towards life, and, last but not the least, the way he has guided me in my role as the MD & CEO through examples and anecdotes. I have heard people ask him at forums how ICICI has so many women leaders. To this, Mr Vaghul always said, "I simply looked at merit and not gender or any other criterion to judge performance."

The person behind the public face

I enjoy reading, but I am don't get enough time. I cherish those evenings when I am able to spend time with my husband, talking about books he is reading. At times, he reads aloud excerpts from those books and we discuss them. I love music and watch a lot of world cinema. I can watch a Satyajit Ray or Ingmar Bergman or Francoise Truffaut film any time. College environment played a major role in shaping my interests in art, world cinema and classical music.

I have an extremely understanding and a supporting husband. So, it does not seem so difficult to me. But all said and done, it is fine as long as you don't worry too much about what people say and go by what you think needs to be done. Whether we have been able to create something of lasting value at IKP Knowledge Park is for posterity to decide, but I am proud and happy to be part of the creative process and am thoroughly enjoying the journey. Every day comes with new ideas and excitement and the myriad possibilities of being able to contribute to the development of the society makes me push for more.

Message to women

To the young women in the field, I would say that open up your mind, think big and embrace the world with its infinite beauty. Enjoy whatever you do and keep yourself engaged. It's important to perform consistently.

(As told to Vipul Murarka)