

## Why I Love Chemistry

*Neeraja Raghavan*

Until the year that I went to Class IX, I was like any other schoolgirl - in that I hadn't the faintest idea as to what I would do in college. One day, it was literature, another, art, and yet another, medicine. Not surprisingly, the future was one big blur, which alternately, took on new forms, depending upon the current trend amongst peers.

And then, our Chemistry teacher walked into Class IX. I had heard of her eccentricities and unique traits: that she wore her sari with not a pleat out of place, she donned a lot of makeup, and that she talked while looking up at the ceiling, and indeed, she lived up to her fame in all these respects.

But what no one had ever told me was this: she was simply riveting!

She held my attention from the word go! I listened spellbound as she articulately waxed about some topic (I forget which) in Chemistry. All I recollect is that I was not the same person after my first period with her. My God, this was awesome! Her clarity was astounding. It was as if the pages of a crystal clear book unfurled before my eyes, just as the words rolled off her tongue. What a subject, man! If my mouth could water at the prospect of learning more in this fascinating field, it surely would have. Right away, I knew what I wished to do: Chemistry, Chemistry and more Chemistry. If someone could have poured it down my throat in barrels, I would cheerfully have drunk it all. In fact, ever since that day, as I would pack my bag according to the time table, the Chemistry period would seem to shine and sparkle from the time table, as if it had a light of its own. Why couldn't we have all eight periods of just Chemistry, I would plaintively muse. And on those days when we had a double period of Chemistry, I would dance my way to school.

What was so special about this teacher, you may well ask. She was clear in her communication, for one. If I

listened to her once, that was enough. I got what she had to say. Then, she made the logic of the subject emerge clearly through each exposition. Chemistry was a subject that seemed so easy, when she taught it. (And she was my Chemistry teacher right until I finished school). I felt supremely confident that my Chemistry marks would soar above the other subjects in my Board (school-leaving) exam. (In fact, they didn't: amongst my five subjects, I scored the least in Chemistry).

But the precious thing was this: my performance in any test or exam did not really influence my love for this subject. For Ms. Gomez had given me something invaluable: a love for a subject that bordered on devotion. Chemistry was my first true love: and I didn't mind if my love was unrequited! I was absolutely determined to pursue the subject in college. Why, I would discover a new element: it would be named Neerajanium, and so on; Marie Curie was my role model, Ms Gomez came second.

In my final year of school, Doordarshan broadcast a television programme wherein they interviewed research scholars of Delhi University. Young men and women who were studying for a Ph.D. in Chemistry were interviewed by the TV Channel. And a more depressed bunch of youngsters would be hard to find. Their entire body language spoke of their despondency. Wilting before the camera, these drooping youngsters bemoaned their fate in having opted for a field with no career prospects. Many of them spoke sleepily of how they would be jobless after they submitted their doctoral theses.

The very next day found me at the centre of a barrage of questioning by my classmates. [All of them knew only too well how I had set my heart on doing Chemistry in college.]

"So?" they smirked. "Did you see the programme last night?"

"I did," I replied calmly.

"And? What have you decided to do now, in college?"

"Chemistry," I replied without a pause.

"Are you mad?" They were shocked, and descended upon me like a bunch of vultures. Did I even have the faintest idea what I was embarking on? A wasted life? A life without any career prospects?

I was truly without any apprehensions whatsoever, as I calmly countered their attacks by saying: "I love the subject and that is what I wish to do."

It speaks of the intensity with which I already loved the subject that I felt not a shred of fear. After all, when one is doing what one loves, one doesn't look for any other motive, was my simple logic. Years later, when I completed a Masters' in Chemistry and decided to go in for a Ph.D. in the subject, I wrote a letter to Ms. Gomez and thanked her for sowing the seed of such a long lasting love affair.

It was only when I was later faced with a career choice that I realised she had planted more than one such seed: for, by now, it was patently clear to me that I had to be a teacher. If one teacher could impact me so:

wouldn't it be wonderful if I, too, could impact a student thus?

And so it is that a dedicated teacher turned my life around: in my choice of a course for higher study, my choice of a career and in many ways, the very way I think about Chemistry and Science.

I have often been asked if this teacher impacted all her students thus: and the answer is, no, she did not. While most of her students agreed that she taught well, I was one of the few to come totally under her spell.

But I think my story's import lies in this: the power a teacher can wield, and the timelessness of her influence, even in a career choice, not to speak of the way one views the subject. Today, I can honestly testify that Chemistry is not a subject that needs memorization significantly more than any of the other sciences do. For I was taught so, and have, I hope, managed to teach so. Thank you, Ms. Gomez!

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## A CASE IN STUDY

### Towards a People's Education Movement - Tamil Nadu Science Forum (TNSF) and School Education

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This article traces the historical evolution of TNSF's role in education from the mid-1980s to 2008. From organising a few training programmes on low-cost activities for teachers, TNSF today is set on a mission to galvanise the entire Tamil society to focus on school education.

#### Formative years

Tamil Nadu Science Forum (TNSF) was established in 1980 by a motley group of scientists in IIT Madras, research scholars from universities, and a few school

and college teachers. In the initial years, the activities were more in the nature of expressing concerns over the deteriorating environment, the impasse in science education and concern regarding the use of science and technology for building atom bombs. Slowly and steadily, students, research scholars and teachers were attracted towards TNSF, and it became active since 1986. This group, which started out by organizing 'popular science lectures' in the city, began to take telescopes and slide shows to villages, to show people the stars! Puzzling as it may sound, even hungry and