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Presentation: 'Gender imbalance in STEM studies'

The gender imbalance in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine) is a contemporary issue that is widely discussed today. The roots of this imbalance lie, to a large extent, in the history of women's education. Women of colour in particular today lack role models in STEM and multiple publications and projects are aiming to correct this. This project is a study of Indian women scientists in the 20th century, and the ways in which their gender, race, religion, nationality, and subject of study affected their academic, professional and private lives. I will be looking into the impact of colonial education policy on women's education, particularly the study of home sciences. There is a strange contradiction between natural sciences and medicine, where it was acceptable for women to study medicine and nursing, to maintain the purdah in public spaces, but not natural sciences as these were not vocational subjects. Crucially, in the mid-20th century, women scientists were not co-opted by the national movement or the post-independent government the way that male scientists (such as Homi Bhabha, Meghnad Saha, P. C. Mahalanobis, etc.) were. I will try and explore some of these themes using the case study of Dr Kamala Bhagvat (later Sohonie) who was the first Indian woman to complete a PhD in the sciences in the UK. She was at Newnham College, Cambridge from 1939-40. Dr Bhagvat was later the Head of the Biochemistry Department at the Lady Hardinge Medical College in Delhi. According to her son, Anil, '...She was patriotic and actually returned home from Cambridge to give her might to the freedom movement...very influenced by the Mahatma...' So the question then becomes, despite attending a few rallies in Bombay, and her visibility in the Indian scientific community after her return to India in 1940, why was she not brought into the folds of the national movement or recognised in broader society? And how does this history shape our understanding of contemporary women in science?

Bio

Megha Harish is an MPhil student at the Cambridge Centre for South Asian Studies. Her interests are in and around education, interdisciplinary, women's history, development, equality, identity, and poetry. She is also a Barbican Young Poet, 2015-17.

