

## Marriage effect



S. Ramaseshan in the Physics Department, Indian Institute of Science, ca 1950.

'What?' my uncle looked annoyed at my father, 'marry her into that "eccentric family". We know that C. V. Raman is a genius – but he is eccentric – I hear. There are a few more like that in that family, I know'. My academic father, who had brought me up since a baby, was very calm. He said, 'I have met Ramaseshan at the Physics Department at the Indian Institute of Science. He is a bright and an intelligent youngster. He does look a little bit shabby in his khaki jerkin and needs a haircut. But I like him.' This particular remark of my father somehow reached a few of his friends and we got about ten electric irons as marriage gifts! In one of them, G.N.R. who gave us a large, expensive iron had left a little note that said 'not to be seen shabby ever!'. My uncle just shook his head, 'he is just a lecturer and may not be earning enough'. But my father was firm.

I am eternally grateful to my father for he gave me not only his love. But he chose me the best of husbands. In the early years of our marriage, the parlance of science was absolutely new to me. The physics I learnt in school was about light and sound. Very, very, basic. Then, one left it behind and moved to study English, history, etc. You were not getting trained for a profession. You were expected to learn cooking. How to run a household. Then eventually to get married to a nice person. When I got married not only was I not a scientist, but a very poor homemaker. I did try out my cooking, inexperienced as I was, on my husband. He never once complained. He was a good sport and accepted me as I was. The real acceptance of my inadequacy was by the 'mob'. The number of scientist-friends of his young (his students) and not so old (his colleagues) who were 'in and out' of our small cottage. The department of physics was only 200 yards from our house, 'a very

sweet, small one'. They ate whatever I cooked without a complaint. So did his many 'non-scientific' friends who were there most of the time. They all just accepted me for what I was.

When the scientists from the physics department came home – I was only a 'passive listener'. There were words like 'diffraction and coherence', 'Faraday effect', 'magneto-optics', 'Bragg reflections', 'birefringence', 'molybdenum'. They would often talk about using 'this method' while others would say try the 'other method'. They seemed to understand clearly what they were talking about. I was completely foxed by their conversations.

I can never forget the 'Tuesday Physics Club' – called for short 'Tau-Pi-Chi'. One week it used to be in our house. The next week it was in G. N. Ramachandran's house on the same campus. We used to have about 20 scientists – most of them from the physics department from the Institute. These included V. Chandrasekharan (*Curr. Sci.*, 2004, **87**, 822), G. N. Ramachandran (*Curr. Sci.*, **80**, 908–910), P. S. Narayanan, G. Suryan, Gopinath Kartha, V. Radhakrishnan, H. S. Ramachandran, Sivaramakrishnan, S. Swaminathan (from the Department of Chemistry), P. K. Subramaniam (from the Department of Metallurgy) and a few others. A few from the Raman Research Institute like S. Chandrasekhar, A. K. Ramadoss, R. K. Bhatt and Amulya Kumar Reddy from Central College, who took the photograph of Ramaseshan accompanying this article. One person would talk about a particular topic – and a marathon session of discussion would follow. My part in this discussion was supplying pots and pots of tea, and sandwiches. Once in a way 'Uppuma' – which I had mastered to make by then. 'The mob', I felt, turned up only for these eats! But my husband thought otherwise. It got worse once when my sister visited me. She asked me 'what are they talking about – this method and that method?' I shrugged my shoulders. They are surely talking about some high science. She had a smug look on her face and made a remark. 'Now I completely agree with uncle. Not only have you married into an eccentric family, your husband has some crazy friends too!'

One day I mildly asked my husband, 'Don't you think you should have married a

scientist'? He laughed and said thank god you are not one. I knew you were not a scientist when I married you. So please be as you are and I love you for that. That of course reassured me quite a bit. Anyway, lest I look 'dumb' when my cousins and other relatives came to visit me, I decided to learn a few things.

One day I asked him what is this 'Raman effect' you keep talking about. You must at least tell me this. My husband smiled and literally came down to my level of intelligence. He explained in a few words 'the Raman effect'. And also said that it is a very important discovery. It is going to be used in most scientific fields. Even I, now notice, how they are using 'the Raman effect' in biology and chemistry and other fields!

A few days later I again asked about another effect. I often heard my husband and some of his friends talking about the 'Zeeman effect': 'So what is that?' I enquired. He at once was most willing to explain this to me. He said, 'There is this magnetic field'. I at once looked down on the floor and asked him, 'where?'. He broke into peals of laughter. And said 'You trust me don't you. And you believe in me'. I said of course. 'Well now you just trust me'. And he explained the 'Zeeman effect' to me as simply as possible.

When my cousin and a few relatives visited me now and then they would ask me 'What are they talking about? I would nonchalantly say 'Oh they are discussing the Raman effect'. A couple of times for a change I even ventured, 'it's the Zeeman effect they are talking about'. I would have a knowledgeable look and my nose up in the air. For a change sometimes I would say 'it is the Poincaré sphere' they are talking about!

A few years later once my young nephew came to visit me. We heard the train coming from the city station and when it passed our house the noise became loud. After it passed by, the noise became fainter and fainter. I told my young nephew 'that's the Doppler effect'.

My husband was writing something for *Current Science*. He looked up at me and smiled and said 'that's a good example'.

That day I felt that 'I had arrived'.

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