

ASIMA CHATTERJEE : A DOYEN IN THE CHEMISTRY OF NATURAL PRODUCTS

DHRUBAJYOTI CHATTOPADHYAY*

The year 2017 is the birth centenary of Dr. Asima Chatterjee, a doyen in the chemistry of Natural Products. She was one of the pioneer women scientists in India. In fact, she was the first woman to be awarded the Doctorate of Science (DSc) degree by any Indian University; first woman scientist to occupy a Chaired professor of any Indian university, first woman General President of the Indian Science Congress and also first woman scientist to receive the Shanti Swaroop Bhatnagar Award in Science and second person in chemical science. We know that the social and cultural taboos secluded women from the scientific research and science study; it was traditionally preserved for men for a long period throughout the world. Only a few women can come out to establish themselves due to their strong will force and unconditional love towards science. Asima Chatterjee was one of such woman scientist of India. Her major interest was on the Chemistry of Natural Products from Indian Medicinal Plants.

ASIMA CHATTERJEE née Mukherjee was born on 23rd September, 1917, in Kolkata, the capital town of West Bengal. Her father Indranarayan Mukherjee was a medical doctor and mother Kamala Devi was a housewife. She was the eldest among the two children; the younger one was her brother Sarashi Ranjan Mukherjee, who became a renowned doctor. Both the parents were highly devotional towards Indian culture as well as modern education and successful enough to inculcate this temperament among their children. Asima's parents took special care to see that she was well conversant in Sanskrit which enabled her to read two great epics the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and works of the renowned writers of ancient India. These books deeply interested her in Indian tradition and culture. India is rich in medicinal flora and has a long history of their use in the Ayurvedic system of medicine. The scientific use of these medicinal plants to treat diseases was institutionalized in India under the Ayurvedic system. Asima was keenly

interested to explore this side from her childhood days. She felt the urge to introduce this idea in modern medical system and devoted her life to separate the chemical components of plants followed by elucidation of their molecular structure, which was really painstaking work at that time. On the other hand, her brother followed the western allopathy system and later became a renowned doctor and Founder Director of Nuclear Medicine in SSKM hospital (formally known as Presidency General Hospital) and retired as the Director of SSKM hospital. He also received the Shanti Swaroop Bhatnagar Award in Medicine, this being only example of two sibling receiving this prestigious Award. He collaborated with his sister in her research on medicinal plants. Beside science, Asima was interested in vocal music since her childhood. She received training in classical music, Dhrupad and Khayal, for over fourteen years and stood second in the All Bengal Music Competition in 1933.

From her very childhood, Asima was a meritorious student. In those days, Bethune Collegiate School of Kolkata, founded by Mr. John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune was inextricably associated with higher education for

* North Bengal Science Centre, P.O.-Matigara Siliguri, Dist.- Darjeeling. Pin.- 734010, e-mail: dckc.sc@gmail.com