

## International Women's Day is about celebrating the changes women have brought to their lives.. Changes, however small, matter, say some of the pioneering women of IIT Kharagpur

A video doing the rounds on WhatsApp asks women to do one thing this Women's Day – to “uncelebrate”. Celebrations are due, it says, only when the world is truly free of gender bias. It is like saying you are allowed to go out with your friends only if you score 100 per cent in your board examination. What about the distinctions or even the pass scores in the many exams in between? Don't they count?

Well, they do. And the International Women's Day on March 8 does precisely that. Celebrating a day as special does not right all wrongs. It does not make the world an equal place for women. It means we understand that we have walked some distance. It is about celebrating victories, no matter how small. It is also a reminder of the distance waiting to be travelled.

Changes, even the minuscule ones, matter. That is the message one got, loud and clear, from some of the pioneering women of IIT Kharagpur. Some of them run departments, specialist centres in the oldest IIT in the country, and some run their houses and their enterprises as diligently.

Swagata Dasgupta, Associate Dean, Continuing Education, and Head of the Centre for Educational Technology, talks of the remarkable change that IIT Kharagpur has undergone. She, along with several other women, Deans, Heads of various Centres and holders of statutory positions in the Institute, was congratulated recently by the director, Partha Pratim Chakrabarti, for their participation in the administration of the Institute. Professor Dasgupta says, “Men have got used to working with women. Today women are appreciated for the role they play.”

Professor M. Padmavati, Dean of the Rajiv Gandhi School of Intellectual Property Law, among the first women to head a law school in the country, says, “The very fact that women are in top positions in IIT Kharagpur shows that the Institute an equal opportunity workplace...Being a residential campus, the participation of women in decisionmaking here becomes more relevant in creating a sensitized environment within the campus.”

One result of this sensitization was the establishment of a creche in 2016. Says Dr Dasgupta, who has been in the Institute for 22 years, “It is a tremendous change, particularly for young working mothers.” But even before the Institute had got to work on the creche, women within the campus had effected the change. A creche materialized as a private initiative of a resident of the campus in 2003 and Mrs Madhulipa Das, wife of a faculty member, who has been running it since 2015, is happy that she is making a difference to many mothers whose needs, she says, she is acutely aware of as a young mother.

Professor Anjali Gera Roy, Humanities and Social Sciences Department, has been in the Institute for 29 years and believes that small victories are important. When she joined, she says, there were women in

the faculty for Humanities and Architecture and some in the natural sciences, but not many in engineering. Today, women are heading some of the engineering departments in IIT Kharagpur.

In fact, IIT Kharagpur has just instituted an annual student excellence award in the honour of Professor Mandakini Majumdar, one of the first female engineers to be appointed professor at the Institute. The award is being sponsored by one of her students and IIT KGP alumnus, Professor Chandralekha Singh, and Jeremy Levy of the University of Pittsburgh.

The choices women have made, and are increasingly making, has changed the thinking within the Institute. Says Gera Roy, "Earlier, women were consigned to play bit roles in the life of the male faculty members. The next generation of women were not willing to make that compromise." With a growing number of working couples, the Institute is having to think of ways to exploit the wide pool of talent on campus. The Institute offers various employment opportunities for the spouses of the faculty.

Women in IIT Kharagpur, however, do not depend on institutional mechanisms to bring changes in their own lives or in those around them. Take Mrs Barnali Chakrabarti, wife of the Institute Director, who, together with three other ladies of the IIT campus, has taken it upon herself to supervise the halls of residence. At least thrice every week, along with the chairman of the Hall Management Centre, they visit hostels to check if hygiene is being maintained, if the food cooked is healthy and if civic repair is being done. The information is passed on to the Institute authorities for action. "There has been tremendous change," she says. Since the visits are random, the staff are on their toes. She also keeps a tab on the wellbeing of students.

She is equally passionate about the campus's beautification and cleanliness, often sending off pictures of bylanes or interior roads that have not been cleaned to the authorities concerned, or brainstorming with the horticulture department about what trees to plant. The other thing she does is encourage students who participate in sports. She has made sure that the feats of the students in sports are publicized. "Nothing pleases them more than being appreciated by the community in campus," says Mrs Chakrabarti.

Professor Prabina Rajib, Dean of the Vinod Gupta School of Management, which is now one of the top-ranking business schools in India according to the NIRF statistics, says, "The history of IIT Kharagpur is deeply entwined with that of India's struggle for freedom and self-sufficiency. It was here that women freedom fighters broke gender stereotypes and stood up against British oppression. Their brave hearts and spirits resonate with the women of IIT who strive to bring positive changes to the fields of science, technology and management."

IIT Kharagpur is not an idyllic world. As Professor Sudeshna Sarkar, celebrated scientist and Head of the Department of Computer Science and Engineering who will also be heading the Institute's foray into Artificial Intelligence, says that the gender disparity is even "unnatural". Yet is important to remember small victories. A day like March 8, she says, would make people aware of their unconscious biases and provide role models for the young to follow.

While giving her vote to the celebration of a special day for women, Professor Sangeeta Das Bhattacharya of the School of Medical Science and Technology and professor-in-charge of its counselling centre, presses for a little change. "We really need to discuss what we talk to our children. We always tell our daughters that they can achieve anything they want. We should also be talking to boys about the importance of being well-rounded persons. Without that they can never understand the other perspective."

In a separate section:

Other women on the IIT KGP campus, such as Mrs Sonali Ghosh and Mrs Moushumi Goswami, by looking for ways to satisfy their creative urges, have made perceptible changes on campus. Mrs Ghosh, more well known as 'Sonalidi', a Masters in Dance from Rabindra Bharati University and a disciple of the noted Kathak exponent, Amita Dutt, engages children, adults and students alike in performances she choreographs for cultural events apart from taking regular classes for those willing to learn dance. The Institute recently asked her to take a workshop during the induction programme for 1<sup>st</sup> year students.

Mrs Goswami, better known simply as Moushumi, has started a bakery enterprise on a scale unheard of in IIT Kharagpur. Her outlet, named "The Burmese Box" after Leela Majumdar's all-time favourite novella, now caters to the sweet cravings of students on campus, family events and, more recently, weddings. She is also secretary of ASMA, an NGO that has used IIT Kharagpur's technical expertise to bring change in the lives of the tribal women and children in neighbouring Balarampur. And ASMA is one of several other such enterprises of the campus's ladies trying to effect change in the neighbouring villages. Moushumi, however, does not believe in celebrating Women's Day. "Every day is women's day, mother's day, father's day, and so on," she says.