



## Alumni Link

A publication of the Global Alumni Association of  
Bengal Engineering and Science University, Shibpur

**Ila Ghose ('51ME)**, the first woman engineer from Bengal Engineering College.

*This little girl was a bit different from others in her locality. So when she started riding a bicycle at the age of 12 and learned how to drive a jeep at 16, it raised quite a lot of eyebrows amongst her friends and relatives. But when she wanted to become an engineer, and her affectionate father approved it, it was too much for the people to digest! – “যতীনবাবুর মাথা খারাপ হয়ে গেছে” they said! .....*

*It may sound a bit out-of date for the present day situation – but we are not talking about the present now. The incident mentioned above happened 62 years ago – in 1947 when the Indian government opened all the avenues for engineering studies for women, and Ila Majumder, now Ghose, went on to become the first ever woman engineer in Mechanical Engineering from Bengal Engineering College, now Bengal Engineering and Science University, Shibpur, Howrah.*

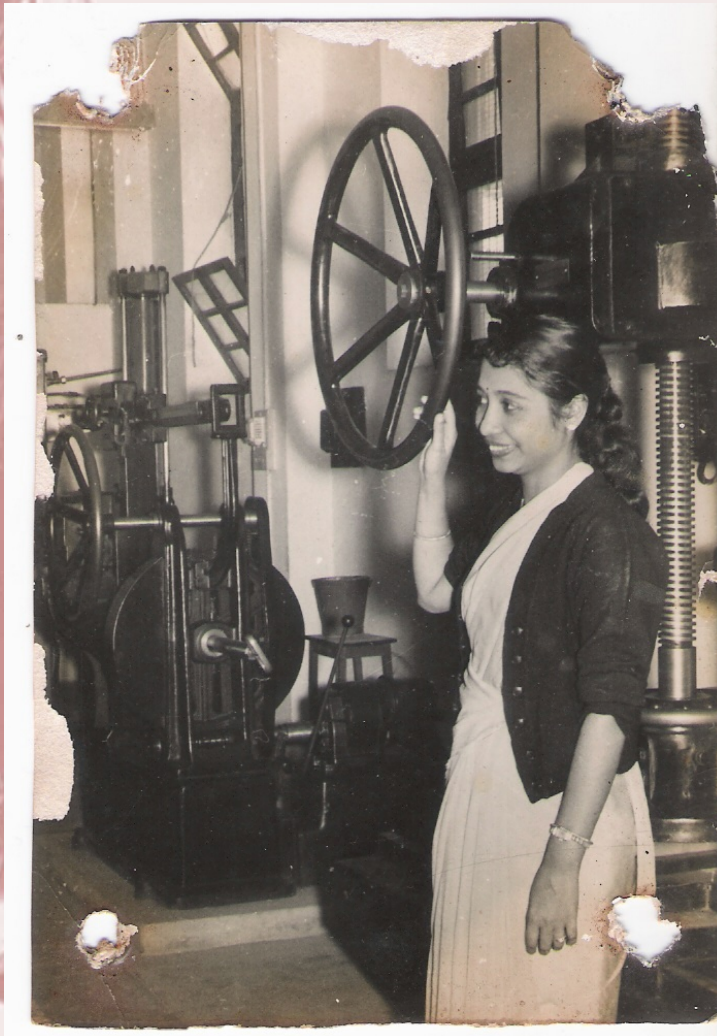
*Ila-di's interview was published in the leading English Daily newspaper 'The Telegraph' in 2008. An excerpt of the interview was later published in the GAABESU Newsletter ([http://www.becollege.org/GAA/docs/AlumniLink9\\_2.pdf](http://www.becollege.org/GAA/docs/AlumniLink9_2.pdf)); but her contact details were not available to us till the end of 2008. Finally, in January 2009, it was possible to get in touch with her with the request of an interview which she gladly complied. We promised not to repeat any of the questions that she has already answered in her interview in 'The Telegraph'– and also promised to make the questionnaire interesting enough so that she too would feel interested to answer them. To which she replied “I shall certainly try to reply at my leisure to your 'prosnoban' but I have no idea whether it will satisfy you and whether publication of the same in your newsletter will be worthwhile. I shall be looking forward to answer your questions. All my good wishes for GAABESU, I shall try to help you in my own way but please do not forget about my age; I am a 1951 graduate.” – but the fervor and enthusiasm she showed in answering all our questions on time, and sending them back via post, in a bunch of neatly hand written 5 pages, most certainly defied her age. She also agreed to share with us a cherished possession – a photograph that was taken in the Strength of Materials laboratory.*

*GAABESU Publication Sub-committee is proud to present a heart-to-heart talk with Ila-di ('51ME).*

- Engineering not being a common profession for women, at least in your time, what prompted you to choose engineering as a career? What was your long term professional goal?*



*I guess I had only a fancy about studying engineering as I had no idea what it means. But I always liked challenges and liked to do what people said girls can't do. So I could ride a bicycle at the age of 12 and drive a jeep at the age of 16. I was more or less an intelligent student. I wanted a good profession and wanted to be financially independent.*



- When you expressed your wish to pursue a career, which was (and still is, to some extent) predominantly male-dominated, what was the reaction in your family?

*My father late Jatindra K. Majumder was very liberal minded. He was a first class first in MSc, a deputy magistrate (Bengal Civil Service), with six daughters (I am the third) all of whom he wanted to educate as best as he could. He resented very much when friends and relations pitied him for having so many daughters.*

*In my family, only my father's approval mattered, so reactions of*

*others didn't matter much.*

- Who encouraged you the most? Was there any hindrance from family and the locality/society? Did you hear any funny comment about your decision?

*With my father's permission, I appeared in the tests for admission to the medical as well as engineering colleges. It was the first time due to India gaining independence, that all areas of study were declared open in the year 1947 for both girls and boys by the government. I got selected in BE College as well as in Calcutta Medical College. I wanted to opt for engineering and my father agreed. Relations and friends thought it was very unwise. General opinion was "মেয়েটার ও যতীনবাবুর মাথা খারাপ হয়ে গেছে".*



- Did you have any alternative careers in mind in case your wish was not granted? Or were you 100% sure about your family's acceptance and your capabilities to make it through?

*I was adamant as a young girl. If I failed I would have gone for medical studies.*

- From your interview in The Telegraph, we know that you got through an entrance exam. What kind of exams used to be held those days? How different was the format from the present kind?

*So far I remember there were several papers to appear. Maths was the main subject paper, a little tough. Also the drawing paper. The others were physics and chemistry which I found not so tough. To tell you the truth, I am not acquainted with the present day entrance exam papers. My interest ceased with both my sons entry into IIT Kharagpur in 1977 and in 1990 respectively.*

- What was the first day in college like? You said students were shocked to see girl-students in the college – tell us some funny reactions/anecdotes about this if you remember.

*It was rather uneventful; We two girls went to the class. The other girl 'Ajanta Guha' always wore a trouser and a shirt and I wore a sari in front of many curious eyes. In the afternoon, we had drawing class. In those days, we had to carry the drawing board and the T-square ourselves, and we noticed during the class hours, hundreds of boys peeping into our class room from outside.*

- Where do you used to stay in college? I believe there were no separate hostels in the college campus.

*The college authority put us up initially in the ground floor of Principal's quarters in a single room flat with an attached bath. This girls' hostel was later shifted to an adjacent flat of the library.*

- Tell us something about your college and hostel life. (We may use excerpts from your earlier interview with 'The telegraph' if you permit. and please add something if you want to).

*As far hostel facilities, a maid servant was employed by the college authority to serve us but it was basically to bring the food from the boys' hostel (Downing, it was). For tea, etc. we used to get them from anywhere. Apart from attending classes, life was very lonely.*

- Tell us something about your husband's role in your professional life. I, as a full-time professional and a full-fledged "দু নৌকায় পা দিয়ে চলা" woman, realize how important it is to have a supportive family structure. Let us know about your support-system.

*I completely agree with your comment "দু নৌকায় পা দিয়ে চলা" for all working women. I don't know how to describe my husband's role, as far as attitude is concerned; he was liberal, with very modern ideas. Being educated abroad, he believed in women's emancipation. But as far as sharing chores of daily life was*



concerned, he was a total failure. I depended on hired maids who were easily available in those days. I married quite late, in the year 1959. My first son was born in 1960, and the second one was born in 1967. There was a stillborn daughter in 1963 – the grief of losing her I could not forget for which I blame myself and my pressure of work. At that time I was working towards setting up the Government of West Bengal's first polytechnic for women in Calcutta (meant only for girls), recruiting mostly woman teachers and as many woman technical staff as possible.

- Tell us some of your professional achievements and especially \*the assignment\* in particular that will always remain close to your heart.

After 2/3 years of work in factories and workshops, I joined Delhi Polytechnic in 1955 to teach. This was the only government engineering college at that time in Delhi, under Delhi University. Within a short time I published two books, 1. Applied Mechanics through worked examples and 2. Hydraulics through worked examples. I could do this without much effort because I used to teach these subjects and wrote exactly the way I used to teach. This was very successful and at a very young age I became quite well off; the books sold very well.

Another assignment in particular that will always remain close to my heart is in the year 1985 when I was appointed a CAO in UNESCO for setting up a Mahila Polytechnic in Dhaka, Bangladesh. I was on deputation and spent nearly two year. I completed my assignment of setting up the same, right from the scratches to the entire process of starting classes in architecture and electronics for only girls in Dhaka. Working at Dhaka gave me a lot of satisfaction as I got so much freedom in carrying out my assignment.

- Have you ever faced gender bias in your professional life? If yes, how did you overcome it?

Of course, I have faced gender bias all the time in my professional life. I think it will take a long time to change the mindset of the society, and there is no other way to bear it. But it hurts when the cases of selection/promotion comes, how the authorities find flimsy excuses not to offer a woman her rightful place as they feel she is not supposed to boss over men. One had to tolerate this.

- What are the comparative professional challenges a woman engineer needed to overcome 50 years ago, 25 years ago and now. Is there any fundamental change or "সেই ট্রাডিশন সমানে চলেছে"

Except in the cases of admission, the challenges remain the same as they were 50 years ago or 25 years ago, and probably even now, according to me. I think it will take another 50 years to change the environment completely when men and women will be treated equally in their workplace and probably women will occupy appreciable number of posts in all hierarchy.

- This year maiden Alumni Fellowship for Excellence in Civil Engineering (top score in marks obtained in all 8 semesters) goes to a girl student, Pamela Chakraborty (2008 CE). What message you would like to pass on to her?

*Hats off to Pamela Chakraborty. This kind of news makes me extremely happy. She is the role model for aspiring woman engineers and will always remain so. I would like to meet her personally and congratulate her.*

- We know you are the first woman engineer from Calcutta University, but we also think you may be the first "Indian" woman engineer in India. To confirm this, we had posted a question in Yahoo (see link below) but the same still remains unanswered! Can you please throw some light on this?*

*<http://in.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080309041742AAIkPnb>*

*I may be the first woman engineer in mechanical discipline from India and Calcutta University, but I heard that from Madras 'Guindy University', one woman engineer or two woman engineers graduated in electrical engineering before me. You can try to find this out by writing to south Indian universities, particularly to 'Guindy University'.*

- And last but not the least; can we get your permission if GAABESU likes to felicitate you?*

*Well, it will be an honour for me if GAABESU wants to felicitate but after 58 years of my graduation as an engineer, is there a need for it? With all those years of experience, I feel deep affection for all my BE College brothers and sisters.*



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*Interview by*

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On Behalf of GAABESU Publicity Sub-Committee*