

Tête-à-tête

In this special issue on women, we had a chance speaking to Ms. Lakshmi Venkatachalam – D. G. Shipping, India who shares with us, her own story and motivates the womanforce of the nation to go ahead and pursue their goals with the Merchant Navy

ST: How has your journey been so far as a Directorate General of Shipping for India?

Ms. Lakshmi: By and large, it has been smooth sailing with intermittent spells of choppy waters.

ST: How do you demarcate this journey as a woman? Have there been any roadblocks in your life because you are a woman?

Ms. Lakshmi: This is a simple question whose answer I am afraid cannot be so simple. Responsibilities of various positions in the IAS are diverse and have their basis in the laws of the land. Also, most positions are at the apex management level where decision making is based on a set of well defined/evolved procedures. So, whether it is a man or a woman holding the job, the process of decision making is the same and people will generally regard you through the prism of the title you hold. And what people ask of you is the same, whether you are a man or a woman – namely, efficiency in delivery and a sense of justice and compassion to ‘inform’ your decision making. As professions go, I would unhesitatingly say, based on my experience, that for women, government service is the least discriminating, and the bias against women appears to be much more prevalent in the private sector. On another note, people’s expectations from a Woman Officer vary – quite often you have to put up with initial skepticism about your ability to deliver and therefore women have to work twice as hard to prove their worth.

ST: An IAS Officer is some post looked up with utmost respect. Can you narrate to us your journey from the time you began preparing for those exams, when you became an IAS Officer and today – D.G. Shipping for India?

Ms. Lakshmi: I began my career in 1978, right after university and have traversed through many challenging assignments covering many different areas – District Administration, Industry & Trade, Urban Development, Agriculture, Planning and now Shipping, ever since, I took charge as DG (Shipping) in November, 2008.

ST: We often talk casually that women have this barrier of glass ceiling in their professional lives which they have to break in, to be looked up as successful. You, today belong to that category of being successful, of having broken the ‘traditional’ glass ceiling. How does it feel? What is it according to you, which you have gained from the time you were looking through the glass ceiling and after having broken it?

Ms. Lakshmi: What I value most from the career I have had in the IAS is the wide spectrum of knowledge covering so many areas and the opportunity to meet people in all walks of life. This gives you a decided edge in so many ways, increases your confidence level and faith in your ability to deal with multifarious situations. Breaking the glass ceiling was worth its while, in more ways than one.

ST: Any message to women aspirants wanting to join the Merchant Navy?

Ms. Lakshmi: Don’t dream it – just be it,



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