A Chance Road to Harvard

By Weiqi Zhang, CRIMSON STAFF WRITER

Fifteen-year-old Mahzarin R. Banaji says she dreamed of living the adventurous life of a secretary upon graduating from high school because she believed that further academic pursuit was useless and was thirsting for an independent life away from her home in Secunderabad, India.

But a little less than a decade later—after a series of self-described “fortuitous” events—Banaji found herself a student at Ohio State University, studying for a Ph.D. in social psychology. And in 2002 she became a Harvard professor at the invitation of University President Drew G. Faust, then-dean of the newly-founded Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study.

Today Banaji is the Richard Clarke Cabot Professor of Social Ethics in the psychology department, where she has pioneered the study of unconscious prejudice. “Professor Banaji is one of the most celebrated, most cited, and most influential social psychologists of her generation for good reason—her work on unconscious bias has revolutionized how we think about the topic,” Psychology professor Daniel T. Gilbert wrote in an e-mail.

In his best-selling book “Blink,” Malcolm Gladwell devoted 12 pages to Banaji’s research on the Implicit Association Test, a methodology created by Banaji’s dissertation advisor, Anthony G. Greenwald, in 1994. The test is designed to measure the strength of automatic association and is an important tool in social psychology today.

“Individuals are created and shaped by social circumstances far more than they or their observers are able to recognize,” Banaji wrote in an unpublished biography for the Guggenheim Foundation. “Mainly in retrospect, I see my career as a textbook case of how fortuitous circumstances and responsive bystanders eased the path for my growth.”

THE ROAD TO THE IVORY TOWER

After a few late-night talks with her mother, who never attended college herself, Banaji suspended her plans to enter the typing pool and agreed to give college a try for one semester, after which the two agreed that Banaji would be free to choose her own path. That one semester proved to be worthwhile for Banaji. Initially attracted to Nizam College for its co-educational system and proximity to the largest cricket stadium in Hyderabad, Banaji says she found the cosmopolitan social and academic environment a liberating experience. Her ambition of becoming a secretary aborted, she went on to pursue an M.Phil/Ph.D. in general psychology at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi.

Mind-opening as JNU would prove to be, Banaji never finished her study there. “There are few occasions in
one’s life when a course of action presents itself with such clarity that there is nothing to do but pursue it,” she wrote in her Guggenheim biography. While she was on the train home from New Delhi for the holidays, Banaji purchased five volumes of the Handbook of Social Psychology edited by Lindzey and Aronson, for five dollars, lured not so much by the books’ content as by their low price. By the time she arrived home 24 hours later, she had already devoured an entire volume. She says the combination of a focus on social process with an experimental approach presented by the book particularly appealed to her.

A year later, Banaji boarded a plane to Columbus, Ohio, leaving the psychophysics and Marxist sociology she had been studying in India behind. After receiving her Ph.D. from Ohio State in social psychology, Banaji traveled around the country as research assistant, instructor, and post-doc fellow in several different institutes, before she finally settled at Yale to study unconscious bias.

When the Radcliffe Institute of Advanced Studies was founded in 2001, Banaji accepted the invitation to teach at Harvard, becoming a professor in the Department of Psychology and the Carol K. Pforzheimer Professor at Radcliffe.

‘THE MADONNA OF OUR FIELD’

Reflecting on her unusual career path, Banaji says she is reluctant to use her own life as a model for students. But she says she is a strong advocate for women in science careers.

Her implicit association experiments have shown that even female scientists can unconsciously associate men with terms like “astronomy” and “chemistry” and women with “music” and “history.”

Former University President Lawrence H. Summers once quoted Banaji on unconscious prejudice against women in science, recommending people to visit the Web site for the Implicit Association Test, which is maintained by Banaji and her former student Brian A. Nosek, now a psychology professor at the University of Virginia. Just months before, Summers had made his now-infamous comments that attributed the dearth of women in top science careers to “issues of intrinsic aptitude.”

Knowing this prejudice well, Banaji says she always goes out of her way to support aspiring female students in science.

“For younger women whose identity as women in science is not fully formed, I need to keep an eye out,” Banaji says. “If somebody like that comes along and asks, ‘I wanna give up mathematics for social studies,’ [I would suggest to her] ‘well, hold on, maybe you should go. But maybe you shouldn’t.’”

“As a young woman, I cannot tell you how she has influenced the generations after her,” Dana R. Carney, a former post-doctoral student of Banaji’s, wrote in an e-mail. “She is like the Madonna of our field: masculine, feminine, fierce, warm, irreverent, creative, inspiring.” Carney is now an assistant professor at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Business. She says she still remembers listening to Banaji’s “mesmerizing” speech as a first year graduate student, five years before she became her post-doc student. “I remember going up to her...and I shook her hand, and I told her that it’s so rare as a young woman you’ve got to model yourself after those people that sort of defy gender stereotype,” Carney recalls. “She is just a scientist. She is not a woman. She is not a man. She is just so inspiring.”
In 2006, Banaji journeyed to Philadelphia to pay tribute to her Ph.D. adviser Greenwald, who was receiving the Distinguished Scientist Award, a prestigious prize given by the Society of Experimental Social Psychology. Banaji delivered an address recounting her memory of Greenwald. “It made the entire room of five or six hundred people cry,” Carney says, referring to Banaji’s speech. “It was just mind blowing.”

“Tony Greenwald changed my life,” Banaji says. “He didn’t care what I knew, or how little I knew, or how poor a writer I was...he just wouldn’t let go. If I wrote a draft and I gave it to him he would mark it again, but the 13th draft he would still mark it. Every draft, I saved them all.”

Banaji attributes her pedagogical skill in part to Greenwald, saying that he has had an important impact on how she interacts with her students. Greenwald, however, says he disagrees.

“As a teacher, she has abilities that I barely comprehend,” he wrote in an e-mail. “I have no idea how she acquired her skill, other than to be sure that she didn’t get it from me.”

Greenwald does say that both he and Banaji require their advisees to learn how to thrive while receiving more criticism than praise, as they share the belief that perseverance in the face of criticism is a trait shared by almost all successful scientists.

“Shes just really had a unique combination of being incredibly rigorous and demanding, but at the same time you knew she supported you and that her heart was with you,” said Curtis D. Hardin, Banaji’s first Ph.D. student and now a professor at Brooklyn College. “For one thing, any paper, from paper in the class to thesis, was met with just incredibly detailed line by line comments, suggestions, questions...this is probably the biggest sign of love because it takes a lot to do that.”

Hardin adds that Banaji and her husband always open their home to graduate students. “She taught me how to cook simple Indian dishes, and we watched elections together. Their company was just so good,” Hardin says. “They knew what it was like to be a starting graduate student.”

Banaji is deeply involved in the undergraduate experience at Harvard, too. As Head Tutor for the Psychology Department, she leads a committee on undergraduate instruction and oversees all students writing theses. She also has three freshman advisees.

“Even though she’s my academic advisor she would talk to me like my old-time friend, and she really cares about how I am doing and my emotional state,” says Nam Hee Kim ’12, one of her advisees.

Looking back, Banaji says that her teaching experience in India at the age of five might have shaped how she communicates with students today. After Banaji and her sister were born, their mother, a school teacher, became unhappy that she had to stay at home and could not teach anymore. She had a carpenter make three small tables and very little chairs, and opened a school in the house.

“I would be home, so I had to deal with all the kids. So my mother would say, ‘you are five years old, you teach this four-year old how to write letters. Every year I was teaching somebody one year younger than I,’” Banaji says. “By the time I was eight, I had three years of teaching experience.”
“Now teaching graduate students, you know, is my life,” she adds.

—Staff writer Weiqi Zhang can be reached at wzhang@fas.harvard.edu.