ENGINEERING STAR

Arati Prabhakar

[By Akbar Ali]

Though engineering is itself a very expansive and multilateral practice of mathematics, science, and practical ingenuity, as a collective field it frequently lacks one vital component: gender diversity. The dearth of women in engineering has prompted several professional and academic institutions to create organizations whose sole purpose is to recruit, educate, and promote young girls and women into the field of engineering.

This is not to say, however, that the engineering world is completely without its female success stories. One of the earliest and most prominent women to rise through the ranks of modern engineering is Dr. Arati Prabhakar, currently a general partner at U.S. Venture Partners, a venture capital firm which specializes in technology and life sciences.

Dr. Prabhakar began her career in 1984 at the Office of Technology Assessment of the U.S. Congress, where she served as a Congressional fellow and wrote on microelectronics development and research. From there, she advanced to a directorial position at the Defense Department's Advanced Research Project Agency (ARPA), where she implemented the Microelectronics Technology Office, seeking to advance dual-use microelectronics technologies. Her office budget at ARPA totaled $300 million.

At age 34, Dr. Prabhakar was appointed by President Clinton as the 10th director of the National Institute of Standards and Technology, a post she held from 1993 to 1997 and in which she proved herself to be a formidable trailblazer. She was the first woman and the first Asian American appointed to NIST director. As head of the organization, she managed a staff of more than 3,000 and a budget of nearly $1 billion, investing in a variety of companies at the forefront of technological advancement. From there, she served as vice president and then as president of Interval Research Corporation.

Since that time of pioneering firsts and technological innovations, Dr. Prabhakar has chosen to create a niche for herself in the business world, utilizing her years of management and engineering expertise to create a new way forward for small companies with big ideas. Making the transition from accomplished engineer to cutting-edge entrepreneur proved to be natural for Dr. Prabhakar, who in 2001 told *Private Equity Week*, "What turns me on is new technology and business opportunities. During my first career in funding R&D in Washington, I used to push the elephant from behind. Now I feel like I am pulling the elephant."

A senior member of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, Dr. Prabhakar received her B.S. in Electrical Engineering from Texas Tech University (1979) and then her M.S. in Electrical Engineering (1980) and her Ph.D. in Applied Physics (1984) from the California Institute of Technology. In true pioneering fashion, she was the first woman to receive a doctorate in applied physics from Caltech and is currently also the only female on the board of partners at USVP.

Dr. Prabhakar was born in 1959 in New Delhi, India. Discussing her seemingly limitless successes and ambition, she once told *The New York Times*, "I can't be President since I am a naturalized citizen, but I figured everything else was fair game." Indeed.

Reference

Holusha, John. "Profile: Arati Prabhakar—She's Not Just Setting Standards." *The New York Times*, sec. 3, August 1, 1993, 8.