

Good Evening everyone

My name is Mansi and I am Piled Higher and Deeper, just like all of you. For those of you who don't know me, I work with Dr. Ramana Athreya in the biology department. (I was expecting a little sympathetic “awwww” but anyway....). My thesis is about comparing patterns in diversity of birds and moths along an elevational gradient in the Eastern Himalayas, a topic that had sounded way more cooler in my head 6 years ago than it does today. Today, it just makes me want to surf E-bay for gun-sellers. But we'll come back to that. I will take you through this step by step....

It all started about 7 years ago. I still remember vividly that October of 2010 when the first symptoms of PhD started showing : The excitement, the zealously, the motivation, the unrelenting faith that nothing and no-one could deter me from this path that I had chosen. I wanted to work harder than anyone had ever worked on the face of this planet, I wanted to do some ultimate ground-breaking research, something that would revolutionize the way we see and perceive the forests. I wanted to just nail it. Any first or second year PhDs here....You guys know what I am taking about, right. All that testosterone. Its a magical time, till it lasts.

Anyway so I met Ramana, I heard his awe-inspiring plans of research in the eastern himalayas of Arunachal Pradesh and I was completely mesmerized. I jumped with joy at the prospect of finding something that had finally managed to get me excited...I was all like Yo!Nobel...wait up. I am on my way. I was mentally picturing dreams of meeting the YETI on my first visit to the Himalayas. I was so love-struck, I wanted to unravel all the mysteries of that forest, describe every unknown species, hell I fancied myself running into dinosaurs or dragons or like a 500-foot anaconda,some thing you know!! I wanted to do so much.

I instantly agreed to join his (non-existent) lab and I went to the pristine lush forests of Arunachal Pradesh and I got stung by a shit-load of motherf@#\$in' mosquitoes!! After 3 months in the forest, I had become the YETI!! I lost 5kgs just by getting myself waxed.

But anyway the forest was spectacular. There is no denying that. It was virtually unexplored. Like a plump voluptuous virgin just waiting to be explored and fondled with. For me, it was love at first sight. Canopy, so thick that not a single photon of sunlight penetrates to the forest floor. Bioluminescent mushrooms, dinoflagellates....if I didn't know any better I would have thought James Cameron shot Avatar there.

So anyway...what I am saying is that I got at least one thing right during my PhD. I was in the Himalayas. What is the most peculiar thing that strikes most people when I say “The Himalayas”? Height. Right. Exactly. I should've known. I started at a height that there was no going higher from. It was all going to be downhill from then on...I should've seen it coming.

Let me set a little bit of a background here for those of you who're new. Ramana is by training an astrophysicist. I was a microbiologist. He likes to see things in zeroes and ones and I couldn't see beyond green and red. I was a qualitative person whose only exposure to large datasets has been apparel shopping at amazon. For the longest time we had communication gap of the highest order. I remember this one time we had an intense hour long scientific discussion at the end of which I realized we were both talking about two different papers!! TRUE STORY.

He would say “Oh! You should write a 10 line for-loop to get this data in shape” and I was like for-what? Dude I don't speak no “Klingon” or whatever it is that passes off as communication amongst astronomers. Speak in English man. Or tell me to get things done the way other biologists get most of their analysis done - suck up to a colleague in physics.

But no. He insisted that I learn programming. So I did. And to hell with modesty I am pretty good at it. 27 gold badges on stackoverflow!! Not bad for a microbiologist, huh? Of course Ramana deserves a fair bit of credit here...but tonight's about me, and also, he is not here (is he?).

Like any other advisor-grad student pair, we've had several fights on several different occasions. And not just fights, even scientific discussions with him were so intimidating initially, I felt like I was such a waste of biomolecules. The fungi growing on a disintegrating corpse has a higher purpose in this world than me. And all this was because of no fault of his own, I mean you can hardly blame a guy for being intelligent you know!!! Does any body here relate to what I am saying? Did anyone ever feel like a moron in front of your PI?

And then it dawned upon me, there is a reason a phd is called a phd. Doctorate in philosophy. Your phd work could be on quantum physics for all I care but what you eventually end up being awarded is still a doctorate in philosophy, not a doctorate in f@#ing quantum physics!!

Because these 5 years of your life are so much more important for character building than actual science. I am becoming more and more convinced that science is just a by-product of my phd. I

have grown more as a person in these 5 years than I did in the previous 25!! Yes, well I am 30, f@#k you too!!

Interesting thing about being 30 and unmarried and a woman is that everybody I meet either looks at me with empathy, *ki awww bechari isko kisi ladke ne pasand nahi kiya hoga*, or they look at me in amazement...like Oh! So this is what a lesbian looks like!! Once and for all, I am single by choice people!! Not my own though. It was difficult to explain to my boyfriend that the reason why I couldn't call him for 3 months was because I was busy fighting mosquitoes. And after a point it became a little difficult to explain to the army people that the reason I need to borrow the satellite phone is because my boyfriend wants to know *ki shona ne khana khaya ya nahi (has my sweetheart had dinner?)!!!*

So that's how two of my relationships ended.

But I'll be honest. I thoroughly enjoyed working in the lab. It was ridiculously exhausting but I am so glad to be an ecologist who got the experience of wet lab. Unfortunately though, a molecular biologist who can also code, aren't exactly matrimonial qualities, hence my relationship status.

And then after a while I realised I couldn't date anyone who did not have the same passion for science as I did. And here is why. I have never stayed in the IISER hostel. I stay in a rented 3-bedroom apartment on Sus road that I share with two other girls and 3 cats. The dream is to have 9 by the time I hit menopause.

These other girls who live with me work in the IT sector. They are software engineers, you know the kind that the nation has been churning out like shezwan chutney. So I hang out a lot with them and their friends. We even took a trip to Ladakh together and when we returned, Shruti – my friend told her colleagues at Cognizant that Ladakh was beautiful, it had a lot of penguins!!! And that's not the funniest part. They f@#king believed her!!!

My own brother who is an android developer, when he is asked by his friends what does your sister do – he either tells them “Mothology!!!” Or he just conveniently tells them *kuch nahi mujhse paise maangti hai har mahine (She does nothing, keeps asking for money every other month)!!*

At his wedding, during the cocktail party, (and he is my younger brother ok, 3 years younger to me), so at this cocktail party my sister gave a speech where she joked about how when he was born on

the 1st of July 1989, it was my first day ever at school and he is getting married today and I am still studying!!!

Life is tough man! PhD ain't no rainbows and butterflies.....at least I got moths in mine!!!

But we're all here today, all of us have more or less been through similar phases in the recent past.....and I bet my manuscript under review that none of us would want to trade lives with our non-phd friends!!! Right??

Because we know now that much like a career in science, a PhD is not for everyone. It requires a peculiar mix of intelligence, discipline, creativity, rationalism, stubbornness – and sheer nerdiness. And even though all of us have these in different measure, a successful PhD student has a pretty healthy dose of them all.

PhD is hard. It's meant to be hard, not because inflicting pain is necessarily fun, I mean not all of us are into BDSM, nor because some scientists are 'dementors' and not because your PhD is expected to solve the mysteries of the universe. It's hard because it is an apprenticeship in science: a frustrating, triumphant, exhausting, and ultimately Darwinian career that will require everything you can muster.

A PhD is essentially a test. And we can't fool ourselves into thinking that we pass this test by passing the degree. Wrong. The fact is that passing a PhD is like getting a certificate of participation. Why? Because almost everyone who starts a PhD and sticks around long enough ends up getting one. No, the real test is what happens *after* your PhD. That's when we'll know whether we've really passed. If we do well, it opens the door to a career of unparalleled intellectual freedom. I know of no other profession on the face of this planet that gives mental rewards of such high orders!!!

And with much pride I want to add that this was all meant in good humor and should be received that way. My PhD years have undeniably been the best years of my life. And I will in a heart-beat, agree to do it all over again if I have to. And I am talking about not just my PhD, but my PhD with Ramana. That man pushed me harder than anybody ever did in life, but god knows I wouldn't want it any other way. He's been a wonderful guide, and it has been an absolute privilege working with him.

