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A Woman's Journey in Science: A Journey of Resilience, Challenges and Belief

Thank you, Poonam and Sucheta, for giving me this opportunity to reflect on my journey—one that I especially want to share with young women standing at the threshold of important career decisions, perhaps facing some of the same questions, doubts, and choices that I once did.

My journey has been shaped less by a carefully planned roadmap and more by unexpected turns, difficult choices, rejections, risks—and a few people who believed in me when I was still learning to believe in myself.

I was born and brought up in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, at a time when the career options for girls were, let us say, slightly more “customized.” Most girls were expected to get married after graduation, or at the most after post-graduation. And when it came to professional education, there were two popular destinations either engineering or medicine. Research was certainly not on the standard menu!

Fortunately, my parents were different. They wanted me to either pursue an administrative service or do a PhD. And that is how I ended up at IIT Bombay to pursue a PhD in Physics.

I was not one of those students who knew from childhood that she wanted to become a scientist. In fact, I was quite a casual student—not exceptionally brilliant, but certainly not bad either. When I started my PhD, I honestly had very little idea about what research actually meant. I only knew that I had to work hard.

And I did.

I completed my PhD in three and a half years in a department where five years was almost considered the natural lifespan of a PhD. I came out with a decent number of PRBs. But, ironically, I think that was the easy part.

The real struggle started after the PhD.

My postdoctoral years were quite challenging. There was criticism, self-doubt, uncertainty, and plenty of moments when I wondered whether I was actually good enough.

At the time, I did not realize it, but those difficult years were probably the most valuable training of my scientific career. They taught me to become independent, to defend my ideas, to accept criticism without allowing it to define me, and—most importantly—to keep moving and improving.

Those experiences taught me something I still strongly believe: **everyone has a “Hanuman” inside them. The problem is that sometimes we also need someone or some trigger to remind us of our strength.**

Eventually, some of the criticism turned into appreciation. But just when I thought things were becoming easier, I encountered my next challenge.

Finding a job.

By the way, I got married in Mumbai during my first post doc. I somehow convinced my family for another post doc abroad. It was not easy but eventually they agreed and I did another postdoc at Brown University in USA. So, finally after spending so many years studying and doing research, I wanted to build an academic career. But I also wanted to remain close to my family. And that combination turned out to be considerably more difficult than anything else in the life.

I explored almost every possibility in Mumbai. I tried different departments at IIT Bombay. At IITB, I encountered the issue of academic “inbreeding”; elsewhere, not knowing Marathi became a problem. At another place, I was considered overqualified. And at some places, I was simply not considered suitable.

So I started looking beyond Mumbai but only in metro cities to have better connectivity to Mumbai, while still trying to remain connected to my family.

I tried Bangalore. There, I was told—quite confidently—that I might have published good papers abroad, but once I came to India, my focus would inevitably shift to family and my research productivity would suffer.

I tried Delhi. At one place, it seemed the decision had already been made. At another, there was simply no response.

After a while, I began asking myself some uncomfortable questions:

Do my publications really matter?

Why is my marriage part of the discussion about my scientific career?

Why is being a woman, wanting a family, somehow treated as a scientific disadvantage?

And perhaps the biggest question—am I being unreasonable in wanting both a career and a family?

At home, the situation was equally complicated. Nobody really wanted me to move away from Mumbai. So there I was—wanting an academic career, wanting to remain close to my family, and caught in a dilemma about what to choose.

After a lot of thinking, I came to a simple realization: **I had to choose a path that would allow me to be happy.** Because if I am happy and fulfilled, I can keep the people around me happy too. But if I sacrifice my aspirations beyond a point, I may spend the rest of my life regretting it—and, perhaps, unintentionally make life difficult for those around me as well.

And then came SNU.

A friend mentioned Shiv Nadar University. I applied, and I received a positive response.

Coming to SNU was not an easy decision. It was a relatively new private university, not very well known at that time. And then there was Dadri and Noida, which did not exactly have the reputation of being the dream destination for a young woman moving for a job.

But I took the risk.

And I am immensely grateful that I did.

Because SNU is where I truly began to understand the importance of something that cannot be measured through publications, citations, or impact factors:

The power of someone believing in you.

And for me, that person was **Rupa, Prof. Rupamanjari Ghosh**, then Dean of School of Natural Sciences and later VC of SNU.

I still remember my first meeting with her. She looked at me and said, *“I want you to do good research, publish ACS Nano, PRBs from SNU. Tell me what you need.”*

That sentence may sound simple, but to me it was transformative.

She did not begin by asking what I could not do. She began by asking **what I needed to do it.**

She provided HPC, encouraged me to aim higher, and—more importantly—gave me something much more valuable: **trust.**

There were several instances when I struggled to balance research, teaching, family responsibilities, and the personal choices that come with being a woman in academia. There were moments when I thought, “Why am I running this race if I am not even able to spend enough time with my family?”

At times, I seriously considered going back to Mumbai.

But Rupa never made me choose between being a scientist and being a person.

She gave me flexibility when I needed it. More importantly, I never had to ask or say anything, she herself used to understand.

She showed me that **leadership is not about extracting the maximum from people; it is about creating an environment in which people want to give their best.**

And I believe I did.

Because when someone places that kind of faith in you, you do not want to break it.

You work harder.

You do not want to let them down in any case.

And Then What Has This Journey Taught Me?

Scientific careers are not built on intelligence alone. They are built on **resilience, persistence, self-belief, and the ability to survive uncertainty.**

There will be people who tell you that you are not suitable.

Someone will question your background. Someone will question your institution. Someone may even question whether you can balance family and research.

You cannot control all of that.

But you can control whether you give up.

As a member of **GIPWG—the Gender in Physics Working Group of IPA**, I particularly want to tell young women students not to carry the apprehension that building a successful career means putting family life on the back seat.

You do not necessarily have to choose one over the other.

Yes, balancing both is challenging. Yes, there will be compromises and difficult days. But women are more than capable of building fulfilling careers while also nurturing a happy family life. The key is not to believe that you must be perfect at everything, every day. Ask for support, build a support system, and most importantly, do not allow others to convince you that your ambitions and your family responsibilities cannot coexist.

Most importantly, **do not allow other people's limitations to become the boundaries of your ambition.**

You may not start as the brightest person in the room. I certainly did not.

You may not have the best institute, the best resources, or the easiest circumstances.

You may have family responsibilities.

You may face rejection after rejection.

You may even have days when you seriously wonder whether all of this is worth it.

But keep going.

Work on your weaknesses. Learn from criticism. Ask for help when you need it. Find people who believe in you—and when you find them, value them.

Because sometimes, one person's faith can change the entire trajectory of your life.

For me, that person was Rupa.

Rupa, **thank you—from the bottom of my heart.** You have been much more than an administrator or a mentor. You have been an anchor at a time when I was trying to find my balance.

I have learned from you not just about leadership, but about **empathy, emotional intelligence, courage, and standing firmly for what is right.**

Today, I am fortunate to have a scientific career that I am proud of, a loving family, two wonderful children, and a life that I once thought might not be possible.

And perhaps that is the biggest lesson of all:

Sometimes the road becomes difficult not because you are on the wrong path, but because the path is preparing you for how far you are capable of going.

So to every young student and scientist here:

Do not give up on yourself.

There is a “Hanuman” inside every one of us.

Find yours. Believe in it. And then make the world believe in it too.

