Pune girl gets Harvard fellowship in honour of Amartya Sen, & a selfie

A

PUNE girl, who is pursuing her PhD in virology (HIV evolution and host immune response) at Harvard University, received the rare honour of being one of the recipients of the Fellowships for Students from India established by the Government of India in honour of the extraordinary accomplishments of Harvard Professor Amartya Sen.

Vinitha Joshi, daughter of pediatrician Dr Rajan and gynecologist Dr Vidya Joshi, completed her undergraduate studies in biotechnology engineering from Sindhag Institute Pune and later pursued her Masters in Biotechnology from the Department of Engineering and Applied Sciences from the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

After completing my masters, I worked at Harvard Medical School in the lab of Dr Michael Farzan (that moved to Scripps Florida after six months) on HIV entry inhibitors. That was when I decided to pursue a PhD in the field of virology. After two years of working in the lab, I applied to a few schools and was accepted here at Harvard," says Vinitha. Interestingly, when Vinitha first received the email announcing the fellowship, she thought it was a hoax. "I received a letter from the Admissions Office saying, 'Congratulations! You have received the Fellowships for Students from India as part of your financial aid package.' Since I had not applied for it, I naturally thought this was a spam email asking for my ID number and other school details. I sent an email to the school asking 'Is this a legit email?'. They replied yes it is legitimate," she recalls.

But she says she still didn’t have all the details of the fellowship except that it was started by the Government of India in the honour of Amartya Sen’s achievements. "To know more, she wrote to the Nobel laureate himself.

He replied saying the whole thing began with the GOI sending money for a full professorship to Harvard with the proposal that a department chair position be created in his name. He did not want a chair in his name and wanted the funds to be used for fellowships for Indian students to study at Harvard. So the money intended for the professorship was converted into fellowships in his honour," she says.

While receiving the fellowship that covers her first-year tuition, as well as provides her with a stipend (35,000$ pa), was an honour for her. Equally important was the opportunity to meet Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen — a man who she says showed her the true meaning of humility.

“My fiancé Sebastian urged me to meet Sen but I was scared that I would not have anything to say beyond three introductory lines. I met him in the hallway and like a starstruck fan, blurted out my three lines. His face lit up and he invited me to his office to inquire about my research. At the end of my little didactic session on HIV, he said he was impressed but confused too, "Speechless, I laughed," said Joshi, adding that she was touched by Sen’s sincerity when he asked her about her parents, hometown etc.

But her proudest moment came when Sen asked for her phone number. "I asked him if I could take a picture of him. And he replied, "You have to be in the picture too. Can you take a selfie?" This was the only time I have approved of that word," she said.

Her career goals? Joshi says she plans to stay in the field of academics, apply for a post-doctorate position after her PhD and hopefully work her way towards becoming a professor with her own research lab.