

The Road Less Travelled: My Ph.D. Journey Through Struggles

As I reflect on my PhD journey, it's clear that it has been anything but smooth sailing. This is a tale not of triumphs, but of trials - a candid chronicle of the struggles that have shadowed my academic pursuits. *For stories of success, you'll need to look elsewhere.*

Before My PhD: The Prelude of Challenges

My academic journey was marred early on by a less-than-stellar BTech CGPA, a direct fallout from one of life's cruellest blows - the sudden loss of my mother during my third year of undergrad. Denied a final goodbye, I was left grappling with loss. Her demise plunged me into a severe depression, leading to a moment where only a timely call from a friend prevented a tragic decision. This period significantly impacted my academic performance, and consequently, my PhD applications were met with rejections from many top colleges, highlighting the harsh reality of CGPA-based filtering.

Despite my efforts as a research associate and my numerous published papers, these achievements did nothing to open the doors of prestigious institutions for me. By the way, I did mention these struggles in my personal statement, which, it seems, might not have got any attention. I feel these doors are still closed for me.

The PhD Odyssey: A Series of Unyielding Hurdles

2018: Cultural and Linguistic Isolation

Joining a lab with no other Indian students, I found myself struggling to blend in. The lab's conversations, conducted in a foreign language, only intensified my sense of isolation.

2019-2020: Financial and Research Setbacks

My first project required extensive GPU resources, which were unavailable at the NLP lab at the time. I had to invest \$3000 from my own pocket for a Titan-RTX and a system. This significant financial burden, coupled with our refusal to compromise on quality, delayed my first PhD paper's publication. Meanwhile, another group published a similar idea first, gaining recognition that eluded us. By the way, I lived in a common hall for three years to save money, allowing me to support my family back home. I never owned a car (till date) due to its recurring expenses.

2020-2021: The Pandemic and Research Stagnation

The pandemic left me directionless in my research for over a year. Working from home was challenging, and despite managing a successful internship, the waning interest post-internship due to pandemic inertia meant another paper went unpublished. It took me two more years to finally publish that work.

2021-2022: Financial Strains and Personal Turmoil

Needing funds for a collaboration project, I again paid out of pocket, this time \$1500, to avoid delays (though I was later reimbursed). Concurrently, my father's hospitalisation due to an accident weighed heavily on me, creating a period of profound emotional distress. Despite receiving multiple paper rejections and fellowship denials, I persevered and eventually secured the opportunities I sought. Furthermore, due to heating and air conditioning issues in the lab, I found myself compelled to work in a common graduate lounge for a year and a half.

2022-2023: Family Crisis and Professional Loss

During my internship at Bloomberg London, a severe heart attack struck my father. Rushing to India, I spent months at his bedside, feeling guilty for my prolonged absence. Despite my best efforts, I lost him, leaving me with a lingering sense of guilt for not having done enough. This family crisis cost me six months of research, hampering my academic application preparations. I have more to say, but let's keep it brief. Finding it emotionally too difficult to continue in depth. My sisters, never having come to the US, missed both my graduation and thesis defense.

The Personal Costs: The Unnoticed Sacrifices

Beyond the academic struggles, this journey has extracted a heavy personal toll. Five years of isolation, fixated on publications and opportunities, have cost me my hair, its colour, my peace of mind, and even some friendships, in short my life. Weight gain and potential undiscovered health issues are the physical manifestations of this relentless stress. Do remember, every Ph.D. comes with an unnoticed cost. Not all PhDs come with the same personal cost.

Post-PhD Reflections: Independence and Disillusionment

Now, as a postdoc, I relish the independence but am also daunted by the challenges. The academic landscape seems bleak, marked by biases toward certain institutions and trends. A family crisis involving my sister has reignited distressing hospital memories, and visa complications are keeping me from being there for her. Furthermore, a recent remark struck me hard: *"You need very strong support to break into academia."* Academia - The sole reason I pursued and persevered through my PhD encompasses all the challenges. Where this support will come from, I am uncertain!

Final Thoughts

As I stand at this juncture, looking back at the turbulent waters I've navigated, I realise that my PhD journey has been more about resilience in the face of relentless adversity than about academic accolades. It's a story of persisting through trials, of sacrifices and losses, and of an unyielding pursuit of knowledge despite the odds. *Amidst this reflection, I am confronted with a profound question: Has the worth of this arduous journey matched its challenges? To be honest! I really don't have an answer to this hard question.*