Self-Taught Data Expert
Advice for Peers thinking about careers
Inspired by service

What's your story?

Omkar Bhatavdekar
PhD Student, PHutures Intern, Blogger.
Hi Omkar, could you tell us a little about yourself?

Thank you Roshni! Sure, I am currently a fourth year Ph.D. student in the Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering department. I am from a city in India called Pune and I finished my undergraduate education in Mumbai in the Institute of Chemical Technology. I have always lived in a city all my life with Pune and Mumbai both being two of the biggest cities in India. Pune is deemed as the ‘Oxford of the east’ so I was very privileged to enjoy some of the best educational experiences. I have varied interests, ranging from chess to podcasts to analytics and I am learning Spanish. I am always curious about a lot of topics and I try picking up as many new interests & skills as I can.

What inspires you?

Amongst the many things that inspire me, I am keenly interested in data and story telling! It all began with the movie Moneyball. In the movie, a baseball team has very few great players, if any! They have no money or resources. Their ultimate option is to either give up or use smart data driven decisions that no one else has the hindsight to do. Making that decision, enables them to start winning. This idea has inspired me a lot. Whenever I am put in any challenging situation, I tend to assess if there is something more than meets the eye and how and where I can utilize a data driven solution to solve the problem.

What do you like to do in your spare time?

I love doing a lot of things! I am a podcast buff, I have been regularly exercising for a couple of years now. I write very frequently in the form of an independent blog titled ‘An immortal zugzwang’, where I attempt to tell stories about society and sports through data visualizations. I have taught myself a lot of AI, Machine learning and Data Science skillsets over the last year and partake in mini projects. I have also enjoyed being a part of a couple of amazing and thought-provoking pro-bono consulting projects at Hopkins. I also like mentoring candidates, applying to grad school by helping them prepare their application materials. But I would say my biggest passion is cricket and sports analytics. I just love the game. I continuously have one part of my brain thinking about the game or how I can visualize data, draw insights, weave a story. Most of the content I consume and write is focused on cricket!

I am also inspired by service and by empathy. For the last 15 years, my parents have run an NGO back home called ‘Savali’ where we empower children from prostitution and sexual exploitation through education. Growing up witness to the power of service has fortified to me that whatever I end up doing, I want to contribute towards others and to society.
Cricket is a game that the British brought to the sub-continent and the entire sub-continent made it their own. It’s very similar to baseball. There are multiple formats in which it is played. There are games that last for 5 days, some last for 3 hours. There are leagues, world cups everything!

As an International student, what do you miss most about home and how do you stay in touch with your family?

I miss the food to be very honest. But it is hard to go for a year or more for some of us, without seeing family. You miss events, weddings & its been especially hard during the pandemic. It does make me value what I have even more. Video calls always help a lot. I am happy that I can at least see my grandparents every week on the phone.

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Always a happy time with friends, Washington D.C
You are a PHutures Intern. What does that entail?

I started as a PHutures intern in August 2020 and while I had some idea about what the office does, I was interested in learning more about how to best serve my peers of graduate students. I am thrilled that Hopkins is investing resources for PhD and Postdoc professional development.

As an intern, I have juggled a few things, but my main project has involved designing, creating & helping to build & launch the first ever hiring event specifically for PhDs and post-docs. We took a data driven approach that focused on matching companies to candidates. I had the opportunity to manage the entire data pipeline for the event. I was also very glad I could bring in my previous logistics and operations experiences to the table to make the event a grand success! Apart from this event, I have also had the privilege to contribute to the overall strategy for the office during this time. I think working with Roshni and collaborating with other fabulous leaders at Hopkins like Alia Poonawala and Louise Lassalle was wonderful to say the least.

Having been closely involved in creating career focused programming for PhDs. What are some of your key takeaways that you plan to incorporate in your own career planning?

I have learned something new every day and it’s been an experience I truly cherish. For one, I have realized that I sometimes tend to get caught in a bubble of reading papers, doing experiments etc. without investing the time in myself to explore career opportunities and reflecting on my strengths and gaps.

Halloween 2019 with friends

Meeting so many diverse people and hearing their career stories up close through various PHutures events was very enlightening. I have also gained insight into what I should do with my time left in my PhD to be a competent applicant in the outside world. For example, I did not always know or recognize the importance of teamwork, and through this experience, I have understood how the world values that quality. I want to emphasize to my fellow Ph.D. students to grab as many opportunities as you can to learn to become more rounded professionals.

When should PhD students start thinking about their careers?

I have a slightly different opinion than the conventional wisdom. I think one should be thinking about their career on day 1 of grad school. I don't mean in a concrete way of course, but to always be open minded about different paths, if you do have the time. You never know how and where attending one session might lead you.
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What is one piece of advice you would like to share with your peers as they start thinking about next steps?

If there is one piece of advice I can give to someone starting their journey in grad school or my peers who are and have started to think about next steps is to network as much as you can. I know it sounds very cliché, but I think many of us associate networking with being shallow or performative. Some of us even feel guilty as we may feel like its less time to spend reading that one extra paper. I would say do that but talk to people who have been in your shoes just few years ago. What did their journey look like? How did they overcome failure and rejection? People who have done it before us, can provide immense value.

With so many interests, how do you prioritize your time?

I block out times on my calendar to work on particular projects per week. I then dedicate time to the projects with the most immediate need!

What is next for you?

I am taking it at one day at a time in this environment. I have a couple of years left in my Ph.D. so I am very focused on finishing that. Going forward, I will continue to expand my different skillsets and hopefully, when opportunity knocks, I will be ready!

If you would like to be featured in a PhD Spotlight, please reach out to Roshni at rrao12@jhu.edu

Spring Fair, 2019

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- on being an International Student