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Up Close with Aparna Choudhary



Recently, we spoke with Aparna Choudhary, a Solutions Specialist for Global Services in Pune. When not working at SunGard, Aparna trains as a long distance marathon runner, and is one of the few women in India who have tackled this challenge.

You hold a special record for female runners in India. Can you tell us about that?

I have two records currently: the first Indian woman to do a 100-mile run (Bhatti Lakes, Faridabad, India, October 2011) and a 135-mile run (Uttarkashi, India, September 2012).

The first record happened by accident. I was supposed to crew for another runner who failed to call back until the last moment, so I got tired of waiting and decided to participate myself. There were seven

participants and I was one of the four finishers. For the 135-mile run, we were three participants at the start line, and two finished including me. (Pictured above: Aparna taking a break)

Those long distances would take several hours by car. How long does it take to complete a 135-mile marathon on foot?

It takes forever. Actually, it took 45 hours and 27 minutes to finish. Breaks are few, but the clock still ticks during rest periods. It began raining during my event and for reasons that are still not clear, I crawled under a Jeep to take a nap. The water started running under the car though, so I got up. Even eating is done while walking so as not to use up time. Once the miles start adding up, the number of breaks increase as the body starts looking for the smallest of excuses to sit down. Sometimes the mind knows that you're just wasting time, but the body refuses to get up.



You've also been featured in a documentary about female long distance runners. How did that come about?

I ran in a 222km run (approximately 138 miles) in Leh, Ladakh (India), which was at an altitude of 11000-17700 feet. The race is by invitation only, and I was the first Indian to be invited. The field consisted of seven participants, including two women. I met Rebecca Byerly, a journalist and runner, and the other woman during this race. She explained she was filming a documentary and the idea was to capture two essential ingredients: Women and Mountains, and display the stories to high school students in the U.S. (Pictured above: Aparna with Rebecca Byerly).



Rebecca and I were disqualified from the race because of not clearing the cut-off set for first 48kms, as we took six minutes extra to reach the checkpoint. I decided to carry on and finish the race on my own as it didn't make sense for me to go all the way to Leh, and run just 48kms, and I knew I was capable of doing the full 222kms at that height. In the end, it added another flavor to the documentary, as it now also displays how to keep going despite all odds. (Pictured above: a still photo from the documentary 'Women of the Mountain').

The documentary, "[Women of the Mountain](#)" is a feature-length film told through six women: three who run the world's longest ultra-marathons through the world's highest mountain ranges, and three who live in those rugged terrains. From the Himalayas to the Alps to the Sierra Nevada, it tells the stories of resilient women from around the world, and shows how they rise above the challenges of age, culture, gender or any parameters society sets for them.



What motivates a person to be a long distance runner?

A curiosity to go that extra mile to see if it's doable, to explore new places and to keep fit.

What was the longest marathon you've ever participated in?

For a single stage event, it was the La Ultra 2013, 222km run (approximately 138 miles). For a multi-day run (spread across six days) it was a 330kms run (approximately 205 miles) from Dandi to Sabarmati, Gujarat, India that traced Gandhi's footsteps in his 'Salt March' when he walked in a non-violent protest against the British rule.

Describe the process of training for a marathon?

I tend to run regularly, and cover 40-45 miles per week when not training for an ultra. During my training months, I increase the weekly mileage to at least 80% of the race distance. What I have observed is ultras are more mental than physical, so I try to prepare myself in that aspect more. I run continuous loops of 5kms to prepare myself mentally for the long hours and monotony. (Pictured above: cooling off during the run).

What do you think about when you run?

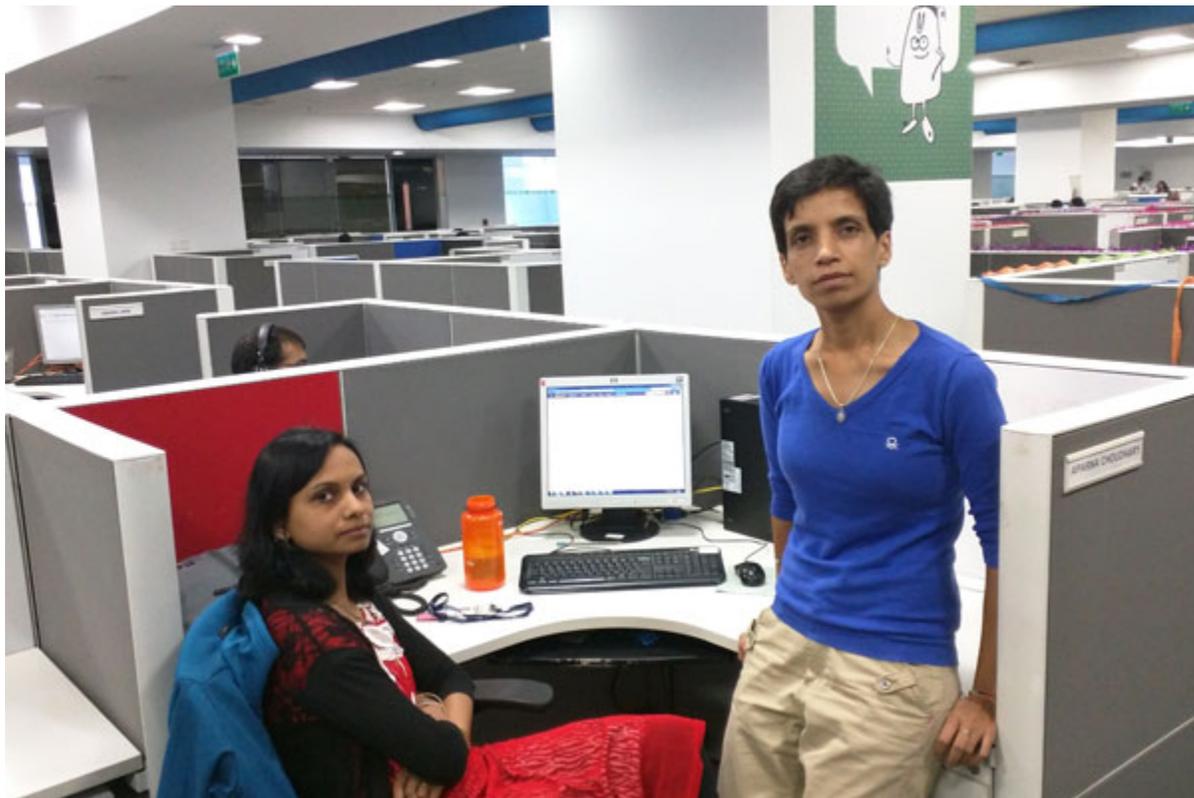
Mostly random thoughts, funny conversations or scenes from movies. Sometimes I start day dreaming and build hypothetical situations where I'm always the hero. In the beginning, I think about the distance and keep on calculating the pace in my mind. Towards the middle, I think I won't ever do another long distance race again and towards the end, I think of the food and bed that awaits me.

Athletes are typically superstitious. Do you have any rituals that you follow?

No rituals, but I have a green long-sleeved t-shirt that I carry with me on all my ultra runs.

Are you currently preparing for a marathon?

Yes, there's a 100-mile event in February in Rann of Kutch, Gujarat.



Can you describe your role with the company?

My role is essentially that of a business analyst, wherein I gather and analyze requirements from the client and convert these requirements into functional documents that are used by the development and quality teams. I also assist with the usability testing of the functionalities being delivered. (Pictured right: Aparna (in blue) in her other natural habitat, the office).

Does the drive you have for running also flow into your daily tasks?

Yes, it does to a big extent. I tend to stay focused on my work rather than the noise around me. Running motivates me to finish my tasks ahead of deadlines.

What do you find the most challenging about running? And about working for SunGard?

Running challenges me to continue to maintain a level of performance. Sometimes, the focus tends to slip away and lethargy creeps in. These times I really have to struggle to pull myself together and get back on the road again. Same applies to working for SunGard. There'll be days of hyperactivity followed by reduced activity. I then pick myself up from this low-level of activity and jump-start again for the next round.

Who is your role model and how does he or she inspire you?

Bruce Lee. I have also trained in Taekwondo and have achieved the red belt with black stripe, which is one short of the black belt. Bruce Lee inspires me the most for various reasons, the most important being that he followed a philosophy of lifelong learning and not putting limits on anything. I try to emulate him.