



Anushka Panda suffers from a physical condition called spinal muscular atrophy

# NEVER GIVE UP, SAYS GURUGRAM TOPPER

Anushka Panda was praised by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Mann Ki Baat

**Naina Arora**

Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all," says Gurugram topper Anushka Panda, quoting American author Helen Keller. For a 15-year-old, she is wise, confident, and immensely talented. Suffering from spinal muscular atrophy, she topped the CBSE Class 10 board examination in the disabled category, this year, with 97.8% marks. And her happiness is beyond measure, courtesy the praise bestowed upon her by none other than

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who mentioned her achievement in his monthly radio programme, Mann Ki Baat, on Sunday.

"I came across the news of Gurugram's specially-abled daughter Anushka Panda, who is suffering from a physical condition called spinal muscular atrophy. Anushka did not let her disability deter her from becoming an all-India topper," PM Modi said on Mann Ki Baat.

"I am in seventh heaven," says Anushka, adding, "I was pleasantly surprised because I never imagined in my dreams that PM would praise me some day. It's a very fortunate moment for me."

Her mother, Archana, has been appealing to the government to make a drug available in India that will help her daughter's condition. She shares that the genetic disease is a life-threatening neuromuscular disorder due to which Anushka's spine is bent. It posed many challenges during her exam preparations. From dealing with concentration issues and moving on a wheelchair to wearing a painful brace, Anushka braved it all. "I never aimed for 97.8%.



Anushka Panda with principal Rupa Chakraborty (left), class teacher Deepali Singh, and her mother, Archana (extreme right) HT PHOTO

But I had to do my best. Even a common cold can accelerate into pneumonia for me because of my poor lung function. I need to be on oxygen when it gets worse. So, I had to work really hard and be on a strict diet to prevent any respiratory diseases," she shares. However, having overcome the challenges, she adds, "Being a topper should never be the aim of your life. You should follow your heart and do your best. And, lastly, never give up."

An avid reader and painter,

Anushka, who is also trained in Hindustani classical music, has opted for the science stream. She aims to get into IIT (Indian Institute of Technology) and become a software engineer.

Stressing upon the need to make public spaces accessible in the Millennium City, she says, "Apart from my school, the place that I stay at, and the airport, there are not many places that are disabled-friendly. Most places in Gurugram have staircases."

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**ANUSHKA PANDA**  
STUDENT