

inVOGUE



**WOMAN ON TOP**  
Warrior was the highest-ranking female executive in Motorola's 80-year history

SPOTLIGHT

*India Cool is...*

# A pioneering spirit

A permanent feature in power lists forged around the world, **PADMASREE WARRIOR** is one of the most recognisable Indians in the global corporate landscape. After moving on from Cisco, she's now poised for even bigger challenges, says AARTI VIRANI

Watch Padmasree Warrior expertly untangle a coil of emerald-green sandal straps, right after our photo shoot in Manhattan's Bryant Park, and 'tech nerd' isn't exactly the thought that springs to mind. But the 54-year-old visionary, who recently sent shockwaves through Silicon Valley for announcing her departure from networking giant Cisco is, self-admittedly, "geeking out" while offering a forecast for the web's second act. "There will be 50 billion things connected to the internet by 2020," she says. "But what will the human implications of that be?"

If there's anyone who should be in charge of wrestling with that colossal quandary, it's Warrior, who, like her surname suggests, exhibits a steely resolve. The Vijayawada-born leader holds degrees in chemical engineering from IIT-Delhi and Cornell University; she ran a semi-conductor factory for Motorola before claiming a succession of senior leadership positions during her 23-year stretch, making her the highest-ranking female executive in the company's 80-year history. It's no surprise that when Cisco wanted to revamp itself from stodgy to savvy in 2008, they sought out the exceedingly versatile technologist.

As Cisco's chief technology and strategy officer, Warrior, who oversaw more than 20,000 employees, was also responsible for steering the company's global engineering operations, delivering a genre-defying leadership style that encouraged creativity and authenticity. It's an approach that earned her international honours, including the Aspen Institute's very first Leadership in Science and Technology award and a spot on *Forbes*'s "World's 100 Most Powerful Women" list—for three consecutive years.

None are easy accomplishments in an industry that's come under fire for systemic sexism, most recently in the form of a *Newsweek* cover story that skewered the tech community for its widespread "brogrammer" mentality. A series of internal demographic reports released by major players last year, including Cisco, only confirm that Silicon Valley is still largely a macho boys' club: females, who make up only 23 per cent of Cisco's employee base stateside, only fill 15 per cent of its technical roles and 19 per cent of its managerial positions. "The introspection, the transparency, and being self-aware about the numbers are all great first steps," admits Warrior. "But I would call it just that...first steps."

When prodded about her next move, Warrior keeps respectfully mum—even in August. "The options coming my way have exceeded my own expectations. It's like the paradox of choice," she admits. "Frankly, it lets me focus on what I really want to do for the next decade." >

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: INGEBORG/LAURA MERCIER/TMG-LA.COM





## HER STORY

Prioritising tasks at office and home has helped Warrior achieve better integration

“There were only five women in my batch of 250 (at IIT) and we really stuck together. That was the first time I realised how important it is to support other people when you’re a minority”

In a hotel room perched above bustling Times Square, Warrior spoke to *Vogue* about Silicon Valley’s glaring gender gap, the work-life balance myth, and her unconventional spin on the C-Suite. Edited excerpts:

### How did IIT prep you for Silicon Valley?

In 1977, it was a big deal to leave South India and go to Delhi. I didn’t speak any Hindi. Coming to the United States, in some ways, was easier than going to Delhi even though I arrived with a one-way ticket and just US\$100 in my pocket. I remember calling my dad [from IIT], being ready to give up, but he told me I couldn’t because I had already chosen my path. Eventually, it taught me the pleasure of being

independent. There were only five women in my batch of 250 and we really stuck together. That was the first time I realised how important it is to support other people when you’re a minority. And to this day I feel like that’s what motivates me to give back to other women in my field.

### Do you ever tire of being a symbol for women in technology?

I don’t think of being a female tech leader as a burden. I’m a woman and I’m in tech; you can’t change that. Hopefully, we’ll get to a day where there’ll be no need to highlight that because 50 per cent of every tech company would be women and 50 per cent of every board would be women. Until we see that reality, it’s important to keep talking about it. Some women say, “I’m just another engineer.” Yes, I’m another engineer, but a woman engineer, and I want other women who are thinking about careers in engineering to know you can have an amazing career without giving up who you are as a true person. And I will continue to talk about that until we get to where the numbers are equal.

### Over the years, you’ve tackled seemingly clichéd ideas and adapted them to better reflect the realities of working women.

#### What’s your take on the especially overused ‘work-life balance’?

I prefer to think of it as integration rather than balance. First and foremost, accept not being perfect at everything. You’re going to prioritise whatever needs to be done because we all do. That’s logically how humans work. One day you’re going to prioritise home because your kid is sick and miss some important meeting at work. On another, you may decide to go for a meeting and skip a parent-teacher conference. If you miss one meeting, it’s not the end of your—or your kid’s—life. Give yourself permission to tell yourself you’re making the right decisions to the best of your abilities.

Sometimes, as women, we turn away from opportunities and put obstacles in our paths. As women, we do really well in managerial positions but hold ourselves back when we get to the executive suite. Suddenly, you’re a role model for other women. Sometimes taking a promotion allows you more flexibility! You can set your own meetings, for starters. Being in a position of power actually gives you the opportunity to practise integration better.

In her bestseller *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, wrote: “When it is time to settle down, find someone who wants an equal partner. Someone >



## ON WOMEN AS LEADERS

"Women have always played central leadership roles in India—whether it is on the global political stage, in the entertainment industry, as business leaders, as scientists or staying home as full-time caregivers. At the same time, we've also seen women being subjected to heartbreaking atrocities and abuse, including domestic violence, rape and bride burning. In the future, I expect women to stand up more vocally for their rights in society and become more visible leaders in the industry. In the next decade perhaps we will see more women CEOs and more women founders of global companies based in India. According to an article I read in *TIME* magazine (June 2012), the highest proportions of women with senior roles are in the BRICS nations—Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. There, women comprise 30 per cent of senior management positions, which is higher than the global average of 24 per cent."

**who values fairness and expects or, even better, wants to do his share in the home. These men exist and, trust me, over time, nothing is sexier." How would you describe your partnership with your husband?**

Mohan and I have been married for over 30 years. We were classmates at IIT. It's important to have a partner who supports you and who understands the trials and tribulations of having a stressful career.

I couldn't have done everything I've done without Mohan. But I don't think you can have prescribed roles—it's all somewhat fluid. We cooked together, which is why my 22-year-old son, Karna, doesn't have rules about what he will and won't do when it comes to housework. When Karna was really little, we decided we'd never both travel at the same time and leave him with a babysitter or friend. It took a lot of coordination—we'd spend two hours a week comparing calendars. So you do have to go through that extra step of planning, which does cramp your style if you're used to being independent but that's the trade-off...if you truly want to have everything! When I mentor women, I tell them it all works out. Karna, who just graduated, saw his mom get up and go to work everyday, so it's all he knows. I've been a C-level executive for his entire life. He's a writer now and all his stories feature strong female characters. So even without realising, these things have an impact on children. He's a feminist—maybe more so than I am [laughs].

**How has the role of a technologist evolved since your Motorola days?**

A decade ago, chief technology officers were like chief scientists: you were the brain, you were pretty hands-on, and you led groups of researchers. If you look at my last position at Cisco, it's more about identifying business-model changes, realising how tech is going to change industries and deciding what start-ups we should invest in. As a strategic advisor, my job was about understanding shifting markets and customer needs and how that would translate into innovation at Cisco. Every industry is going through a major, tech-driven transformation now. But the reverse is also true—people who are technical have to learn about what it



### POWER PLAYER

Since her time at IIT, Warrior has been working towards having more visible female leaders in the industry

means to be a good writer and artist. STEM could become 'STEAM' as the arts become much more important!

**Is there a sector of the tech sphere that could benefit from increased female participation?**

The male-to-female ratio in the venture capital world is even worse than it is in Silicon Valley. We need women

VCs who won't exclude women entrepreneurs. I'd like to see a big shift there. That's why I'm passionate about mentoring entrepreneurs like Aarthi Ramamurthy, founder of the try-before-you-buy gadget service Lumoid, and Melody McCloskey, CEO of StyleSeat, a massive beauty and wellness online marketplace. Of course, I'm not saying we should create environments where we're just funding female start-ups. But being inclusive helps.

**You've amassed over 1.6 million followers on Twitter and use it almost seamlessly, posting everything from inspirational haikus to nail art to nuggets of start-up wisdom. How does the platform complement your leadership style?**

I started Tweeting pretty early, in 2008. I quickly realised it's a very powerful platform where I can participate and listen in on many conversations. There are the women in tech, there's the Cisco ecosystem and there's the start-up community. As human beings, naturally, all of us belong to multiple communities. But Twitter allows us to create this virtual world where these communities overlap. And I post all my Tweets—no one else does it for me.

**After eight years at Cisco, what triggered your decision to leave?**

When I announced I'm leaving Cisco in June, a lot of people asked me why. It's an amazing company. I feel I have the best job in the company but I also feel like you have to leave at the top. I feel like Cisco is in great shape, I'm doing well and that's why I should make a change. In the past, I'd have said, "Well, why would I want to leave?" When businesses are doing well, they have to learn to disrupt their own models, otherwise someone else will. The same thing is true for us as leaders: if you're doing well, you should disrupt yourself and go do something even more impactful. ■