

**In conversation with:
Ronak Jain**



Editor: We'll start off with something that we all want to know about- your research journey from an undergraduate student at Cambridge to a PhD candidate at Harvard. Can you tell us a little bit about that? We'd really like to know.

Ronak Jain: Sure, if I reflect on it, I could spend hours on this question. It's been fascinating, with its own ups and downs. I'll stick to the research part of the journey. In Cambridge, the first two years are meant to be pure coursework. At the end of first year I was particularly excited to get into development economics, it's what I always knew I wanted to go into, even before I started undergrad. So during the summer vacation of first year, I came to Delhi and did an internship at Center for Civil Society. That's where I got my first field experience; where I went around a couple of 11 schools or so, interviewed teachers about incentives and tried to find out about what kind of incentive structure is in schools and so on and so forth. So that internship experience was my first kick-off into research. Then in my second year I took up an RAship. Second year is meant to be where you apply for banks for an internship, and there was a whole rush to it. And I really, really tried to get myself into that zone but I just couldn't. And even if I submitted an application it would come unsuccessful so I knew that that was not my field and I really didn't have a passion for banking. So I kind of just stuck around, RA-ship wasn't a plan. So at the end of second year I didn't have any internship. I went to one of my development economics professors, and asked her if there was something I could help her with in terms of research. And she had some work that she was doing and she asked me to come on aboard and during the summer I helped her with it. That involved a bit of data work- going to the library, looking at previous archives, like history and development, so really looking at all Indian census, dating back to like 1800s and 1900s. So that was a really different experience and she was very encouraging. I guess every step I've had someone who's really encouraged me, pushed me in my research journey. Then came the third year, which is when actually the first proper rigorous research experience kicks off because as part of our undergrad we had to do a dissertation and I enrolled for doing a dissertation on econometrics which wasn't at all my forte. When I went in, econometrics was the subject that I hated the most. I just couldn't get probability theory in my head. But she has become my mentor since then and I really admired her and wanted to work with her. It was one of my most pleasant experiences, the dissertation, the third year, it focused a lot on the econometrics of human capital production estimation, which is not technical, just about skills and how skills grow over time and I was looking at some data from the UK, for children. But that kind of really launched me into [the realization that] yes, this is something I enjoy, I really enjoyed all the conversations I had with her. So that experience more than anything kicked it off. This is the person I look up to, she's always been like a constant mentor in my academic career. In third year we applied for masters, I got into Oxford. There the second year was meant to be a pure thesis, a thesis which could go upto like 15,000 to 50,000 words. So that could be like a proper dive-in to research. And there what I did was, I used my experience which I got in the first year of undergrad, which was on teacher incentives. I had done just qualitative work mostly, coming to Delhi and working at CCS, but that experience got me thinking that this is

the topic which could really use some theory, which didn't have any theory at the moment. At Oxford what I did was I took that topic which I had- teacher incentives and approached it from a theoretical perspective, so I tried a different technique, and there I was lucky to have a really good theory supervisor. So I had 2 supervisors there, again, who really really pushed me and encouraged me. So that was the journey up until Oxford, and that thesis helped me get into Harvard because as part of the admissions process you have to submit something that you've written extensively on and that's original. So that became kind of my natural lead on. When I was applying for the States, it showed off that this is something that I wanted to do, these are the techniques that I've been using, my undergrad gave me a foot ahead in terms of econometrics, my masters gave me a foot ahead in terms of theory and so on and so forth, And in my personal statement, I kind of made the point that I wanted to combine these principles, and go for development economics. And then at Harvard, still in the process, it's not finished but the first 3 years have mainly heavily focused on coursework. But it's been developing ideas and research, in terms of field work, everything is grounded but it's been like a process of thinking and brainstorming about ideas so far. So that's a long-winded story about how every step has led into something else but I guess overall I think what has helped me most is I've stuck(?) on and done whatever at the time, which really inspired me. So whether it was a person, whether it was a professor, whether it was a topic or a subject, like metrics then theory and switching between both. So really doing at that moment, whatever you're enjoying or whoever you're looking upto, I think is a great way to push forward.

Editor: As young undergraduates, many of us are looking forward to perhaps pursuing PhDs or entering the research track as economists. so as someone who's already begun this journey, could you tell us a little about the kind of hurdles that you've faced, perhaps personally or professionally, and if you have any advice for us as undergraduate students?

Ronak Jain: Sure. One thing that often gets lost in all of this is the many challenging times. It's not like everything flows really smoothly, actually there are really stressful points, especially when you're applying. I think that more than anything, when you're applying to places, when you're waiting to hear, that's a period of anxiety. Then also as I said, first year, every place that I've been, has been very challenging. And that is part of the thing when you're moving from school to another school, or moving from university to university, again that first year you have to establish yourself. You have to make yourself known. You have to establish contact with professors, and again and again, every time you switch places, even if it's jobs, that proving yourself bit is there in the first year. So, first year, categorically I've never enjoyed, in any place. Second year is once you start becoming a little more grounded in your place, once professors or academics start realizing- yes this is a hardworking student. You do that by showing your work and dedication, and reading outside the topic. That kind of really motivates me, when professors say, or they start even remembering your name. That is a nice starting point, nice motivating point to begin off. So first year is, once you establish yourself, once you prove yourself, that's all about being grounded. Once you cover your academic ground,

then you move on to thinking about 'what should I do with research?' And 'where should I orient myself?' So in terms of hurdles, self-doubt is recurring. I think none of us openly perhaps admit it to even our friends, but these are moments which again and again you think, 'am I going to be capable of getting this thing?', 'Am I smart enough to be here?' I mean we all use the term 'Imposter Syndrome', it's there in the first year of everywhere you start but also when you're applying, making these applications- Masters, PhDs, that's a constant fear- 'am I going to get in?' And once you get in, it's even harder. You were anxious all of this time and you were like, 'if i'm going to get in, it's going to be such a lifetime achievement' and you go to that place and you're like 'do I even fit in?' , 'am I smart enough as others around me are?'. So that I think, naturally everyone faces to some extent, but no one openly admits it, and it's okay. But part of that self-doubt will push you, is what I'm going to say. Having that self-doubt can also be somewhat healthy, because then it means that it's not like you're going to just sit back and everything is going to be fine because you've done it before. It will push you forward. At least that's how I guess you should channel it, that every time you face these hurdles, you're like 'I'm going to prove myself again, over and over again.' And that's fine. So, self-doubt you have to manage, it will recur. It still recurs, even over the last couple of days. I've been like 'really can i do this?' There have been moments where I've felt my academic peak has passed and I don't know how I got here. I've got some of the best education that can be had, I could just sit tight and be comfortable. But that's not right, you got to push yourself, you have to tell yourself that you constantly need to keep learning. As long as you're learning, you're good, no matter how tiny that learning is. But that growth element is really crucial and you've to push yourself to do it. So in terms of other hurdles, I started out being a really reserved person and that is kind of challenging in today's world. Because if you've noticed, academia today is a lot about presenting your work, communicating your work to everyone. Academic twitter, for example, there's a huge econ crowd on twitter. You need to be self-promoting yourself. That's not something that comes naturally to me. So even with giving this interview I pushed it as far as I could because that's not me as a person. I like to have this ideal, back-dated research view which is you sit at your desk, you do something, you publish it and that's it. You don't need to present it and you know, say 'it's my work and I've done this great work and it merits reading.' In fact, I feel the opposite. Once any kind of research work is done, I feel like that's it, it's not that great, I don't feel like people should read it, or I don't particularly feel satisfied with it. So that is challenging for me, and that will vary from person to person. Some people it comes very naturally. Professionally, that is a hurdle and I think the way forward is just practice and practice until you get there. Presenting, not saying no to opportunities to the extent that you can and just building yourself slowly but surely. It's presenting in your class, it's doing things like this. So one thing that I missed out on my research journey, even for my undergrad, I've always been part of this economics society or some other society where I've had to talk or present or gather a group of people. It's putting yourself out of your comfort zone but it all helps, and especially with academia today, I'm going to make a point because in economics, a lot of recent work has shown, gender is particularly an issue. It tends to be much much harder to see women excel in economics. Part of this reason can be this; we tend to be shy, and talking about myself here, don't

want to generalize, but we can be shier, we can be a bit more modest, but we really need to make a point to try and at least with our research work; own it and present it wherever we feel comfortable. And practice. Practice at every opportunity you get to. That's a professional thing.

Sometimes hurdles can just be, you're not getting ideas, but that's going to come at a much later stage in your lives. I'm going to say, when you're in your undergrad, when you're in your masters, ideas are going to flow and really take that tiny bit of effort. I wish someone had told me that earlier, open a word doc on your computer and save it as 'ideas', even if it's the silliest ideas you can think of, but just start noting them down. Because later when you get more into economics, those ideas are going to shrink. Because the more you learn a subject, the less creative you can get. And I've stuck with the subject for 9 years now, if I count school. It's harder, you need to think of fresher ideas. So I would really suggest, wherever you get a chance, open that one word document or diary and just keep that with you. Even if it's an idea that you get in your dreams and the next day you remember half of it, there was something vaguely about it, just note it down. So you can come back to it when you're at the PhD stage, just look over. Sometimes you'll find that they were silly, 'what was I even thinking of then?' But sometimes you might look back and say, 'that's really what I'm passionate about, it's been there in my head but I just didn't remember to look back at it a couple of times.' I guess that's most of the main hurdles that I've experienced and the other things can be when you're starting to work together and you're collaborating with people. That's a new thing for me because at Oxford and Cambridge, for the thesis and your dissertation, you have to do it yourself, you can't collaborate with people because it's an individual part of your coursework and grades, so you don't work together with others. But moving to Harvard, that's a totally different culture. They actually emphasize that you work with someone, because it's creative and also efficient to the extent that you get skills from other people. Learning from others is the quickest way to learn. When they were describing research to us at Harvard, they said that it can be really isolating, especially as a PhD student, you can get into your own bubble, you can get stuck asking for help etc. But if you have someone else who's also a PhD student, you can work together on something, even if it's as small as checking your code or brainstorming together on theory, working things out, proving things, taking parts of a proof and doing it. That can be really helpful, but the offside is when you're working with someone, there can easily be conflicts in terms of your working styles. You might want to do things really quickly, someone might take more time and there can be those clashes, so you need to be mindful of that when you're working, which I'm sure is part of any teamwork. But that comes on later on in your career, balancing how much you want to collaborate or whether you want to have all projects where you're collaborating with someone versus some project that's your own, that you can fall back on when you have all these conflicts. That's what I'm trying to do now, which is create my own project as well that can go on on the sidelines, that only I'm responsible for. That's all the hurdles that I think have come into my mind at the moment, I'm sure there are many more.

Editor: Do you see a shift in research and data collection methodology in the post-covid world, especially in projects that require tons of field work?

Ronak Jain: Right, I do think there is going to be a shift, I think there are particular fields of economics which are going to experience a shift in methodology, primarily development economics or other fields which are heavily reliant on field work, so survey data etc. At the moment the trend in development economics is being moved to phone surveys or online surveys wherever possible. But at the same time, the thing that's still difficult to adapt to, there are parts of the population that are so disadvantaged you might not even be able to reach them via phone or online surveys. When you're working with that kind of population, things cannot change, you just have to be patient and wait until covid gets over to conduct that face-to-face surveying or fieldwork. But I think a lot of the projects now have moved onto using phone surveys or online surveys, wherever they can work. In economics we talk about these exogenous shocks to economies that sets them on a different path. I think part of that is going to remain. Field projects, even going for work, to the extent that you can pull off using phone or alternative methodologies, you're going to try and do that. It's also easier to call up people than to be there or have surveys physically. We will have to wait and see, is what I'm going to say at the bottom line.

Editor: In the study on the covid impact on the labour market in South Africa, it was found that job losses disproportionately affected women, manual labour and the poor. So what in your opinion are the causes of that and do you think the same can be said for India?

Ronak Jain: Right, I think that's a great question but it's actually an area that we didn't get to concretely in the paper. So what I'm going to say is going to be broad-brushed and what I speculate might be the causes rather than exactly coming from the paper but here's my take- at least, part of the research that I've read, also in developed countries like US, UK, has also found similar kind of results. Manual labour is the hardest to get back into in this world, because of social distancing. Think of your house helper or maid servants in the Indian context. We would not have been able to have them over during the lockdown phase. So those kind of manual jobs, you absolutely cannot do remotely, because by definition these are manual. So it's kind of unsurprising that we've seen those go away. Especially, I'm sure if you've been watching the news in India, the first couple of months there was so much on migrant labour and sending them back home. That's all to do with the fact that you just can't function and these are not the jobs you can do remotely- cleaning, helping in the house or even construction, for example. For all of these you have to physically be there. With regard to the poor, there's a combination of factors. One can be that they tend to be involved in manual labour, so there's a subset, an overlap of people there. The other fact could be that when you come from a poor background, you're more likely to be in informal employment. And informal employment in India is also pretty high, something like 80% or over. Together with informality, it means that you don't have permanent

contracts or job security, so in any kind of downturn, you're going to be the first to lose your jobs, especially in this kind of situation. So that's the bit about the poor. Also, if you think of yourself as an employer, when you're facing troubles, who are you going to let go? Are you going to let go of the people you can replace easily? Sadly, the fact is manual labour or low-skilled labour, categories that the poor disproportionately comprise of, are the first jobs that are going to go.

We investigated the aspect of South African women in our paper, and women tend to be a lot more in manual occupations, and that was the overlap. That overlap explained quite a bit. It was not that they were less educated. Actually, they were slightly higher educated than men in the South African context. But they were disproportionately still more in manual occupations, the jobs that were lost, so that was explaining why women lost more jobs in South Africa. In developed countries, that's also been seen. In the South African or Indian context, the reasons are also that women are more likely to have to work when you shut down, when you're at home, you have more familial responsibilities- cooking, cleaning, taking care of your kids and that falls more heavily on you, I think that's especially true in India. Now I don't know culturally what's the context in South Africa, but India for sure. Informally when I've been talking to my relatives, or with my cousins who are married, they've been saying that it's been a hell of a time. It's like a full-time job- you have to constantly cook and you have to cook different dishes because you're home and you want a bit of variety. So that aspect of familial responsibilities falls more heavily on women, so that makes it harder to work from home.

Editor: So in the same study, one of the key points was that the high rate of apparent job termination means that the rebound is likely to be slow. So in your opinion what will this look like for India considering we're set to lose roughly 130 million jobs during the pandemic?

Ronak Jain: Right. Universally also, I think this is going to be a very tricky time. Initially, the forecast that came out said that due to the lockdown, the economies are going to be really badly hit, tourism, everything is collapsing but then we'll have a massive rebound once we find the vaccine, once everything is back on trajectory. But what this finding on job terminations is showing is that, it's not like these people are kept on hold. If these people were put on paid leave or unpaid leave, when an employer tells the employee that after this lockdown gets over, I'm going to hire you back but I'm not going to pay you in the interim, because of the situation, then we would've had a rapid rebound. It's just the matter of not having an income for these coming months, not going to be constantly working but you have something to get back to. But now when you have job terminations, which is, your employer said, actually these companies are shutting down and they're no longer going to have you back and you're going to be in a pool, as you put in a figure, of 120 million over. You're going to be among the pool, in that situation with also less businesses around. Maybe the hopeful thing we can imagine is that other businesses enter, the online industry is perhaps going to expand now. But even then with that kind of a pool of unemployed people, you're going to be really really competing

for jobs, and that's not going to be easy, like we snap back again, covid goes away, we find a vaccine and the next day, everyone is going back to normal. It's not going to be that. Every job that comes out there is going to have, goodness knows what kind of ratio of positions and vacancies to applicants. Recently in the UK, my dad was telling me that he read news articles that a temporary job opened for someone to help out at a restaurant and there were 400 applications even for that kind of a job. And these applicants were qualified. These are the scenarios that we will perhaps be facing when we go forward. The only thing we can keep fingers crossed for is that there are going to be new industries that hopefully enter the market or expand which will still create jobs, but it's still going to be a tough time. As we'd expect, it's not going to be; look this is over, we all snap back in and things go to the previous normal that we were in. All of these job terminations means, people who have lost their jobs are going to have to apply, wait and it's going to be tricky. It's going to take time to get back to normal, is what I'd expect.

Editor: Thank you for that. So in your teachers' incentives paper you mentioned different kinds of incentives and measured their effectiveness. With online teaching and assessment, in your opinion, which of these incentives do you think will be most effective during the pandemic?

Ronak Jain: Well, that depends on challenges. So, what kind of challenges are we facing? Is it that teachers are not effective in transitioning to this online technology and they need some training? It could be as simple as we don't need incentives, we just need to train teachers so they can adapt to this new way of teaching. Even learning zoom, for example, that's a start. So, to be able to do that or to be able to learn online pedagogy, like, okay, we cannot have the traditional way of just students speaking out when a question is asked. We need to adapt to those ways and structures so and so forth. Instead of incentives, it could just be a matter of retraining teachers to adapt to this new technology. Incentives (when you use them) you want to use them to motivate someone to do something they're not already doing. So, if you feel that teacher effort is really low once you switch to this online thing; the teacher is not as enthusiastic, not taking it as seriously, the way of teaching is not the same and so on, then you can think about these incentives. That paper actually used another experiment which was looking at what if you individually reward teachers based on their student's performance versus if you do it in a team. So what if you have all the teachers in the school and then you reward them if the score of all their students in the school goes up. So, you could do a similar sort of thing in the online era. You could imagine that you give teachers the incentive. Even when you're teaching online, at the end when you have these tests in online format or when you resume school and you have a physical in-person test, if the students improved, the teacher's going to get a reward. Hence, the incentive structure can be similar, it's just being applied to an online setting. But, I would place my bets more on retraining teachers and getting them to adapt to online teaching rather than incentivize it. I think, in fact, if anything, because they are home they're more freed up. They don't have to travel to work, so at the click

of the button they can turn on their Zoom and they can start teaching. So I would hope that those kinds of hurdles or other fixed costs of getting to school, getting to work, getting ready, all that is gone and they can just get out of their bed and teach, if they wanted.

Editor: In the same research paper, some of the problems that you mentioned that schools face also qualify as problems for Indian colleges, for example, professor absenteeism. So, in the light of that, do you think there's a need to extend that research to college professors as well?

Ronak Jain: I think actually that would be really nice. That would be a nice thing to do and I don't think anyone has thought that far because we just expect that by that stage (when you're teaching in a college) you would be motivated enough because you have bright students now. These students, they are adults that you have around. You can't just get your way past teaching them. If a teacher doesn't show up to a class of undergrads, they know that the students know that they're slacking. It's not like slacking arounds kids, to whom you can tell some stories or have absolute command over. So there I think it would be really cool to do such a study, it'd be interesting. But also, there's theoretical literature about and there's been some discussion about the incentives for professors in academia are not well aligned. What I mean by that is, they get rewarded for their research, they don't get rewarded for their teaching. When you're considering promotions or getting a higher post or even recognition in your own department , it mostly comes from your research, not your teaching. So, those incentives are messed up. There's a theory on the effects of incentives on multitasking. According to that theory, the problem with giving any kind of incentives is that things that are harder to measure and incentivize, they'll get ignored, when you incentivize something else. In this case, when you incentivize test scores or research output or publication. That's the metric, right? Publication is easy to see but not your quality of teaching, which is harder to evaluate. It's kind of natural. My answer would be yes, definitely it would be a cool thing to evaluate professors, I'm not sure how cooperative they'd be. They're probably smarter than us, so they'll figure out that they're part of an experiment or they're being analysed. So, all of these issues would be there. But, nonetheless, that would be a cool thing to do, to see how incentives can be slightly changed to motivate them to come to work. It was a surprise to me that you asked about professor absenteeism, I wouldn't have thought of that. The classic image in my mind is that professors turn up, they're not students, at least that's the kind of thing you see in Bollywood movies.

Editor: I think in terms of absenteeism, we're still on the luckier side of this debate at Miranda House because our college is slightly stricter about academics compared to other colleges but we can't say the same about all the colleges at University of Delhi.

Ronak Jain: Right, so then we should definitely do a study on that. Just make sure that the teachers don't realise that they're part of an experiment.

Editor: I think we could get interesting results because a lot of experimental economics has been conducted on students themselves, right? I think going into an economic background has changed our results to at least some extent. So, perhaps, the same would show up for our professors.

Ronak Jain: Exactly, well, that is one of your research topics. One of you should pick it up or collaborate and work on it. Avoid the economic professors because they'll find out that they are part of an experiment. Maybe professors from other disciplines who haven't been exposed to the farce won't realise. I'll be curious to know the results of that.

Editor: When NIRF does the ranking, it takes into account teacher absenteeism and student absenteeism also. So, that's very interesting because they already have that data and that's how the colleges are ranked.

Ronak Jain: That was a great point. When I was doing the fieldwork for my 'incentives for teachers paper' in Delhi and I was going to schools, I found that absenteeism goes into the teacher evaluation as well. Records are kept for that, but the problem is that hardly anyone checks those records. There are no checks and balances about who is recording the absenteeism. I am sure that is not the case at university level. But, yes, If we allocate high enough weights to their attendance or their quality of teaching or maybe student evaluation, we will see a change in the academic structure.

Editor: Job security is expected to be even more precarious in the post pandemic world than it was before. How do you think this will change decisions that college-aged students make?

Ronak Jain: This is actually a very challenging period, especially when the next step for college students would have been to look for an academic job (if that's what you're pursuing). Job candidates who are in their final years of PhDs at the moment, I'm sure they are having a very stressful year. They can't step out because there are no jobs, there's hardly anything. Universities are actually pulling back funding and hires. They are

even firing people who have temporary positions and posts like assistant professors are being pulled back. So, no wonder it's a tough time, the next couple of years are going to be tough. As students, you don't need to worry. You have years ahead of you. By the time you get through your PhD, you will be fine. Hopefully, this 2020 initiated mayhem will be behind us by then. My surf is not worried about the job aspect because when you're focusing on your research, you don't need to worry about what's going to come next or are you going to have a job at the end of the day. I know that's the practical aspect but I would suggest being an idealist for some of the coming years. Focus on your research because it is fun to do it and there is no better time to be engaged in studying. Actually, you should consider yourself fortunate that you're not at that position or that turn of life where you had a job and you're concerned that you're going to lose it, because that is stressful. What's going to come in the future? That will be okay. Do the things that you have never had time to do. In our normal lives we always crib about how we're drowning in our course work and we haven't had a chance to read or explore things. Do that now. Take the time that god has given you to focus on things that you really enjoy. Think about ideas. It's tough and I don't want to underplay that but thinking about that aspect of a job is not going to be of much use. It's not going to give you anything but more anxiety. This is the best time to be a student, is what i'm telling myself. So enjoy that aspect. As a student, you've got the most comfort. You're not in that actual real world yet that you'd have to be worried about the precariousness of job security. So, hold that thought off until you need to think about it. It's all about telling ourselves these little stories that will keep us going.

Talking about your case, you're undergrads. I was not thinking about whether I'll have a job or not when I was an undergrad. Throughout my life I've always been in this tunnel, I've always seen the next step and I've really focussed all my energy on that. During undergrad, the final years of it , I was only thinking about what was next, which was masters. So I focused on: what do I do to get myself into a masters programme? Then, what do I do to get myself into a PhD programme? And now, it's just how do I do my research? So, look at the immediate next steps, not too far into the future. I know economics teaches present biases are a bad thing but now is the time to be present biased,so,be present biased.

Editor: How do researchers and PhD students find people with similar interests to collaborate on projects?

Ronak Jain: That's a really nice question. Sometimes it evolves very naturally. Some of my first co-authors were actually my friends at Oxford. So, I had this co-author, we were doing a micro theory class together and after the class we used to sit together and study. During those sessions, we realised that we are really good at doing proofs or discussing things together. You notice that when you're studying with someone or you're completing your assignment. Sometimes, a collaboration can evolve that way. So, my first co-author was my friend who I met in an economics class. So, that's one way. The other way can be finding collaborators in the field you specialize in. So, because I did research on teacher incentives and human capital in my

undergrad and so on and so forth, I've really tunelled in, somewhat, into the education sphere. So, then what can happen is sometimes when your classmate thinks about a research idea in the field of education and they know that you've got some aspect of expertise in that field, they might approach you to collaborate. You might make other connections, your classmates or some of the other people you meet at conferences. Sometimes, even your professors might introduce you to someone who is interested in a topic which you're interested in and then you can see whether you want to collaborate on something. So, the answer to your question is, it's really a mixed bag. I started out with someone who was a friend, they were my first co-author. Then, I've come to collaborate with my classmates. One of my current projects is with another classmate of mine at Harvard. His expertise is not so much in education but because I had this expertise in education, he thought of an idea on education and we thought why not collaborate?

The collaboration can come to be from a purely professional standpoint, which is, I have a skill that I can contribute to a project and my collaborator has thought of an idea, so we can work on it together. It can also be that you're friends with a person and you've been studying together, and you think that both of you have things to teach each other and make a project a success. Sometimes, collaborations can emerge with people you meet at conferences, that happens too. You meet someone at a conference and you start talking about your research and someone drops in a line, like, "Hey! I'm working on this project. Would you like to be involved?" So, it's a mixed bag and I think it's hard to judge which is going to be a good collaboration. That is going to vary because every single person you meet is going to be different and you are going to have different project dynamics with each one of them. So, you just have to navigate and be open to experiences. Sometimes they will work out very nicely, unexpectedly so. Sometimes they won't. So, take what comes with the tide and learn from those experiences along the way.

Editor: What has your routine been during the pandemic as a researcher?

Ronak Jain: Luckily, the UK has been good in the sense that it's always allowed one form of exercise. So, even during the lockdown, I at least had that luxury to take a round around my neighbourhood. In terms of routine, somewhat ashamedly, I have still stuck to the US time zone. So, that means I get up at 10 am or 11 am which I tell my parents, it's still 6 am US time so I'm still very productive. So, late start to the morning, but then I do make the time to do some sort of exercise, yoga, meditation or even just jogging because I do think that it is a stressful period and that some form of exercise is always good. It's not part of my research routine per se, but I think it's very important to do something that's not just studying to keep yourself in that positive mindset. After that, because I'm collaborating with people, I have calls and I discuss topics with my co-author, so that usually takes up an hour or two of my day. Then, I read a couple of economics papers. Now I am in that zone where I feel like ideas are not coming really naturally or as smoothly as they used to. So, I thought why not take this time, read some economics papers and just take it easy on myself. No pressure, just think of ideas that come around and take it one day at a time. So, I do that for a couple of hours, then I do wall painting, something I've picked up during the lockdown. It's really therapeutic, so I recommend it.

If you have lenient enough parents that are going to let you do that. So, that takes up an hour or so. Then, binge-watching a lot of netflix. You're gonna regret asking this question because you're not gonna see a lot of research happening. This is a complete contrast to what my day would look like had I been on campus in the midst of the coursework and all. My routine at that time used to be to get up at 8 am, spend 8-10 hours in the library and do work. It's a different thing but I think that any work that you can do in this phase is good. You shouldn't be too harsh on yourself.

Editor: That's definitely more productive than me on any average day.

Ronak Jain: That's okay. Everything is not about being productive. Productivity is an overrated thing. I think something that the lockdown does teach us is that it's nice to be able to have that skill, and I would call it a skill, because a lot of us realised that we've always been in that zone that we're constantly doing something. Even to just relax and not have anything to do, I just can't imagine how people lived before us because they were not like this. They were okay just living in their homes and not having things to do and that's a skill. It's fine not doing anything, it's fine not being productive.

Editor: You are like us in many spheres: you're a woman, you're from India and you're an economics researcher (which we are aspiring to be). So, when you went to the US and the UK, how easy was it for you to adjust to the entire atmosphere?

Ronak Jain: I moved when I was 13, with my parents (it may not be the same for you). I left India after the 8th standard. It was really tough for me to adjust to the school life here. I remember, I wasn't even able to hear what they said because they spoke so softly. But in the university sphere, that's not true because professors are themselves international, they come from different parts of the world and they speak loudly and clearly. You won't have that big of a culture shock at university level because one of the legacies of the colonial system is that education systems in India and the UK are really similar. So, you have a similar sort of undergrad, a similar sort of class style and lecture style that you would have in India. So, UK to India, university wise, I don't think there would be a massive difference, but UK to US, interestingly, has also been very different. That was more of a surprise to me. It's different in terms of the academic culture in economics. In the US, it's more about collaborating, more about constantly presenting your work. So, US to UK is more of an academic culture shift rather than a pure culture shift. My takeaway would be that if you're considering going abroad for studies, you wouldn't find that much of a challenge because a lot of the cohorts are very internationally based. So, you won't feel like you don't belong which was a hurdle for me when I initially entered the school system. The school system is different in the simplest ways as well, like in India, we don't move, teachers move. Otherwise, there isn't much of a difference. Also, globalization and academic conferences happen in so many pockets. So, that bridges the international gap. ISI has this development

conference every year, DSE has a development conference every year. At these conferences, academics meet and discuss things with each other. So, there is not as much of a divide as it used to be there. For example, now our classes are happening over Zoom and so are yours. Part of globalization has meant that we connect in a lot of ways, the internet has been a great source for that too. A lot of courses are happening which are open source. edX is a website that has coding lessons and which students can learn for free. So, these kinds of resources are meant to remove that stark difference you find between cultures. When you're doing an online course, you're listening to those lectures which are happening in America. So, you're being exposed to that lecture style. So, as an undergrad, a masters student or a PhD student, you wouldn't find so much of a culture shock moving across countries.

Editor: This was a very interesting interview. Thank you for joining us today and I think we all learnt a lot.

Ronak Jain: It's a pleasure. Every bit of advice that you can get is really helpful. The biggest caveat with all this is that every person has had a different experience and there are no golden rules. Everyone will tell you different things and it's valuable just to talk to different people. It's not necessary that what others have experienced, you'll experience as well. Low and behold, in seven years or nine years down the line, you'll be telling your own stories. All of you will have different journeys, you'll have your own set of lessons. My advice is listen to a lot of people, don't follow just one.

