

IN CONVERSATION WITH ASHWINI DESHPANDE



Ashwini Deshpande is Professor of Economics and the Founding Director of Centre for Economic Data and Analysis at Ashoka University, India. Predominantly, she has been working on the economics of discrimination and affirmative action issues, with a focus on caste and gender in India. Alongside her several distinguished publications, she is the author of the books "Grammar of Caste: economic discrimination in contemporary India" and "Affirmative Action in India". She received the EXIM Bank award for outstanding dissertation in 1994, and the 2007 VKRV Rao Award for Indian economists under 45.

Professor, starting off with your work, collection of disaggregated data involves several dynamics and can be quite difficult. What challenges have you faced during data collection for your research on discrimination and how did you navigate them?

First of all, thank you for inviting me to speak to all of you. It's a real pleasure. A lot of the work that I do is based on secondary data, in the sense that this is unit level data, data on households and individuals, but not collected by me. It's either collected by the National Sample Survey or the India Human Development Survey or the National Family and Health Survey. Now, any survey collection, any survey data, there are challenges involved in it. You can ask what kinds of questions you can ask? What is the best way to answer the question that gets to the response that you are looking for? Not in terms of the response for yes or no, or a particular value, but basically the information that you want from a particular question depends on the way the question is asked. So, people can respond very differently. So, supposing you ask, do you think your income is sufficient to meet your needs? A very large number of people will say, no, it isn't and we barely make anything, and, you know, there's zero income, we don't earn anything. Or if you just ask, how much do you earn, you're unlikely to get any accurate response. But, if you want information on income, then there must be other ways to get information. So, any survey data involves a whole host of challenges. I have done individual surveys as well, and I spent a lot of time thinking about the question, what responses it'll elicit and a very important part of getting it right is pre-testing—what we call pilot

studies. So you test it on populations, similar to the one that you are going to be eventually running the survey on and see the responses. Often, you know, the question is clear in your mind, but when you're asking it, it appears something else to the respondent. So they don't answer it in a way that you expected them to answer. And then you realize that while the question was clear in your mind, it wasn't perhaps clearly stated. So, you must do field pilots, analyze the answers from the pilots and then decide whether the way in which you formulated the question is correct. And, do a few iterations and then go into the field. So yes, there are indeed many challenges and I've learned a lot from each of the surveys that I have conducted.

Professor, in your book, “The Grammar of Caste”, you talk about overlapping identities while mainly focusing on caste and gender. And, in that nuanced analysis, you also point out that those who are disadvantaged—in respect to both identities, dalit women—tend to bear the brunt of disadvantage the most. So, do you think that such multifaceted identities can benefit if they are offered more space in affirmative action or given a separate category of their own? Or, even other than that, is there any way that reforms can be targeted towards this community specifically?

Absolutely. So, you know that there's a big debate on women's reservation bill, you know, political representation for women in state legislatures and parliament. Now, that bill is asking for 33% reservation for women in these decision-making bodies, which is a very progressive step. Now, dalit women activists have been saying that within that 33% quota, there should be a quota for dalit women otherwise the danger

is that upper caste women might disproportionately get elected on the women's reserved seats. And, that has unfortunately sort of divided, not divided, maybe a strong word, but there are differences of opinion on this question within the women's movement.

So, I think that if you recognize the multiplicity of disadvantage, then it is easier to recognize that affirmative action or any other remedial measures must be such that it reaches the most disadvantaged section. Clearly, the most disadvantaged shouldn't get left out of that remedial measure. So, I think that the context for the women's reservation bill is that, the debate on that. And, I definitely think that we need to think of layers of disadvantage, or advantage for that matter, and design appropriate remedial action for different sections.

Over the past several decades due to the technological revolution, several jobs have come up that can't exactly be categorized into the varna system. Now, do you think that the coming up of these occupations has an influence to let people who are disadvantaged in the caste system attain upward social mobility? Do you think that that's possible?

So, you know, the thing is that if you look at the modern occupation spectrum, you know, think of all the kinds of work that people do and you think of the divisions that you see in the—not the Varna, Varna is very, very old—even if you look at the Jati system—which is the contemporary organization of the caste system, Varna is 3000 or 3,500 years old and you'll see basically four or five Varna in it and surely, you know, that's not what economic occupations are in Indian society. So, Jati is the category to look at

, but even when you think of Jati based occupations—and you think of the modern occupation spectrum, you cannot match the two one-on-one. There is a range of modern occupations that have no traditional Jati counterpart. And that's one. The second is, because there is freedom of occupation so, legally speaking, in terms of formal legal structures, there is no prohibition from anyone doing any job if they were qualified for it, right? So that is the formal equality that is enshrined in the Indian constitution, which is freedom of choice for occupation.

But, there is a difference between formal equality and what is called substantive equality—which is equality in law vs equality in fact. So, when India became independent, BR Ambedkar, who was the chairperson of the drafting committee of the constitution, led debates in the constituent assembly before the constitution was adopted in which this question of reservation or quotas was discussed. And, Ambedkar made a plea for the reservation system by saying that India is entering into an era of contradictions because a system of legal or formal equality is going to be superimposed on a base of substantive inequality. So, the inequality that comes as a result of the caste system is not written in law. Law does not allow it. Yet, the inequality is persistent. The legal structure guarantees equality to all citizens regardless of their social origin. Okay. So when it comes to occupation in the modern occupation spectrum, if somebody were to have qualifications for that particular occupation, legally, they cannot be stopped.

Then, why do you see a disproportionate concentration of the so-called upper caste individuals in the better paying top-end of the modern spectrum

and a disproportionate concentration of the most disadvantaged and stigmatized jatis, the Dalits, at the bottom end of the modern occupational spectrum? That doesn't mean that there is no dalit at the top or no brahmin at the bottom. Of course not. But the proportions are vastly different. And, that is not coming because of any legal challenges - that comes because of the fact that the hold of the caste system is very strong and it results in a lot of consequences. One - access to education. School, college, quality of education exposure to overall resources for learning, et cetera. So by the time students come to colleges, the inequalities that are because of caste based discrimination in all other aspects of life are already ingrained. And, there are gaps between the so-called upper class young people and lower caste young people. Over and above that, even if a dalit individually acquires the education that's needed to access a modern sector high-paying job, there's labor market discrimination over and above all of these factors of discrimination. So, while theoretically the possibility of upward mobility exists, and indeed there has been some upward mobility, the constraints that upward mobility comes from are very strong stranglehold of the caste system, of the jati system in contemporary India, so, that patterns of discrimination, both when the child is small in school, in college, in the job market, those patterns of discrimination keep getting repeated. It's a complicated answer, but that's what it is.

Dr. Ambedkar had famously denounced brahmanism and capitalism as the two evils that an Indian worker has to face in the market. But, with the advent of neo-liberalism there has been the emergence of Dalit capitalism, which embraced self-help and entrepreneurial

forces for the dalit emancipation. So, this has been optimistic but what does this idea entail for inequality amongst the Dalits, and the broader annihilation of caste?

Yeah, that's a good question. You know, Chandra Bhan Prasad, who's a leading Dalit intellectual and has been regular commentator on these issues, has argued that annihilation of the caste will occur when dalits become capitalist, that they acquire capital and rise to the top of the economic pyramid—and, that's going to result in the annihilation of caste. And, this idea comes from the movement for black capitalism that happened to the United States following Martin Luther King, you know, following the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. The issue is that capitalism as a system in itself is inequality generating, you know, there are capitalists and then there are workers. So, even if Dalits became capitalist, it doesn't mean that all dalits or a large number of dalits or a large proportion of dalits are going to become capitalist. No, numbers are not important here, the proportion. Because capitalism is a system, the model is, you know, in terms of proportion, there are far fewer capitalists than there are workers. Because, you need a group of people who are going to be the proletariat or the workers in order for capitalism to survive. So, even if black capitalism or dalit capitalism were to be successful in creating a community of Dalit entrepreneurs—which it has been, and those numbers are growing and the accounts that you hear from how they succeeded are absolutely inspiring and so all power to the individuals who faced caste-based oppression and discrimination all their lives and succeeded, despite all odds to become successful capitalists. So, while we must applaud their efforts,

this is my personal view—I don't think that that is a route for annihilation of class. That might play a role in the sense that the greater the number of the successful entrepreneurs, the stigmatizing association of being dalit and being poor gets broken. And, I think that's a good thing. You know, it shows entrepreneurial ability, it shows, you know, ability to succeed. And these are all good role models or good stereotypes to have. But, I think we must be cognizant of the fact that this route is open only to a few. Most of all, not everybody wants to be an entrepreneur. Entrepreneurial activity requires a certain mindset, it requires the willingness to take risks and a life of an ordinary dalit person is already full of grave risks in all kinds of ways. Maybe some people have an appetite for risk and they still want to continue a livelihood activity which is also risky but many may not want to regardless of whether their individual lives have risks or not.

So, to see this as the primary vehicle of the annihilation of caste is, in my view, going to be myopic, it is not going to work out. So, while whoever wants to be an entrepreneur should obviously take the route they want to take - and many have indeed taken that route - but if you look at the overall self employment scenario in India, you look at the micro, small and medium enterprises in India, which is the majority of self-employed individuals, then dalit owned enterprises are overwhelmingly small, low productivity and survivalist—it's something that you do just in order to survive. You are not employed by somebody else so that is why you are called self-employed but you could be a self-employed person sitting on the roadside selling something or repairing something or you could be Mr. Tata himself, both of these individuals are self-employed but you

can see there is a big gap between the kind of activity they are doing. So, if dalit capitalism encourages big, large-scale entrepreneurial activity and creates a class of capitalists, while it might worsen within-group inequality for dalits, at least you have a community or a group of high net worth individuals within the dalit community and there are many things to be said in favour of that. But, the overwhelming majority of dalit businesses are not in that space. I have a paper on 'Dalit Entrepreneurship' and we find a very large proportion of dalit entrepreneurs are own account workers, that means one person. It's literally like setting up something, a "business", even if you have to repair shoes, that's also called self-employment. So, these are very low productivity, elementary, survivalist activities—it's just that you need to do something to live. So, I think when you think of annihilation of caste, there has to be many more elements to that than just the focus on dalit capitalism.

Professor, if we could just interrupt you and go back to a question that we had asked you previously, it was about how dalit women should be offered space within affirmative action and you talked about the women's reservation bill in that context. I just wanted to know if within your work or anywhere else you've come across any such policy in India or around the world which has included multi-sectional identities in its framework?

Yeah, of course. You know, the quota system in the government has vertical reservations, which are caste-based reservations, and then there are horizontal reservations, which include reservation for people with disabilities, or in some states, for women among other things. These horizontal reservations are cross-cutting across the

vertical section. So, within reservation also you can have a cross-cutting category. So, you can have a SC female or SC disabled. There are many ways in which you can specify the intersectionality. One of the challenges with the quota system is that because ways in which you can specify the intersectionality. One of the challenges with the quota system is that because quota is always the percentage, the greater the number of categories you specify, the base has to be large enough. So, a large department, suppose a particular department is a 100 people—by department i don't necessarily mean academic department but rather the base unit on which the quota is calculated—if the base is large you can have many different smaller compartments but if the number of people is small in the base, supposing there are only 15 people in the organisation, then if you have 10% for SC, 7% for ST, etc. you will see that the greater the number of categories, the harder it is to find whole numbers to fulfill those criteria's. So, it's a logistical challenge but you can definitely target policies towards intersectional identities, there are many examples of that.

The other way to go around it is not to have a quota but to give additional points. The Jawaharlal Nehru University had an admissions policy that resembled the additional points system because it wanted to honor many kinds of disadvantages. Now, it has a quota system but earlier what it would do is, it would grant additional points for disadvantage according to certain criteria. So, if you were from a backward district, you would get certain points, if you were female, you got certain points.

In some sense, in a very weak form, the Delhi School of Economics' admission's policy also follows this - they don't use caste as criteria but they do have multiple points to whatever they consider deserves them based on disadvantage and such. So, there are many ways in which you can devise these kinds of policies.

You need clarity on what it is that you want to achieve. In electoral positions, it's actually not at all difficult to implement these policies because you already have elected SC/ST reserved constituencies, those are already mapped out. So, if you wanted the caste reservation within gender, what you could do is, you could convert some of the SC/ST to Women and SC/ST. That would automatically mean only a woman belonging to those reserved castes can contest for that seat. So, it's not hard at all to do in terms of logistics for parliamentary or legislative constituencies. It's much harder to do that for jobs because the base issue becomes very important.

Moving onto Covid and the pandemic, Professor, in your article, "What Does Work from Home Mean for Women?", you conclude that the scenario for women workers post-lockdown looks bleak, and work from home doesn't make it better. You also state that apart from the need for adequate compensation, some "support structures" should be put in place for an equitable sharing of domestic and care work. What do you exactly mean by support structures and how can they be implemented?

So, this is a hard one for policy because it's within the domestic sphere. Even if the government were to make a rule, who is going to come and check inside homes how the division of labour is proceeding? So, this is a social norm that has to change and it will only change when a sufficient number of us decide to change it. History is a guide. So, this is a hard one for policy because it's within the domestic sphere. Even if the government were to make a rule, who is going to come and check inside homes how the division of labour is proceeding? So, this is a social norm that has to change and it will only change when a sufficient number of us decide to change it. History is a guide here. The way social norms change is not by preaching and saying "do this, do that", that's not how social norms change. People can change their behaviour under threat, of course. If I know that I'm going to get killed because I have made a personal choice, I probably won't do it in public because I wouldn't want to die, right? But, in terms of women's work, domestic chores, the norm of greater gender equality happened when women started going out and working. So, the change in norm followed women's entry into the labour force, not the other way round. In European societies and the United States, it wasn't as though something happened and first social norms started changing and then the husbands said, "Oh! you can go out and work", it didn't happen like that. So, I think that when material conditions change, social norms change following that. So, even in those societies where the norms are much more equal than they are in India, Covid has highlighted how the responsibility of childcare or the responsibility of homeschooling or taking care of children or just being caring, disproportionately falls on the woman. So it's just expected that the woman will do whatever else she needs to do but will also do all the care work and if a woman doesn't do it she isn't

considered a good wife or a mother or even a good person in the family. So, it's supposed to be second nature for a woman to be caring, if you're a woman doesn't do it she isn't considered a good wife or a mother or even a good person in the family. So, it's supposed to be second nature for a woman to be caring, if you're a woman you're supposed to be caring. But, I think everybody should be caring, in general we should all be caring individuals and there is nothing gendered about care. What I mean is, in terms of work from home, what happens is that it is non-stop work for women who are working and have jobs. People like me, for example, I still have a job, I'm working and I'm personally lucky to have a family that helps and supports me and we share the household work. But, if I didn't, my employer would not say "Oh, it is okay she has to take care of her home." I would be doubly pressured because I now am aware that I need to fulfill the needs of work from home and I need to fulfill domestic needs of care work, domestic chores, all of that. So, you can't count on first people's hearts to change and then things will get better, that never works, that's not how social change is achieved. Material conditions have to change first, norms follow from that.

Professor, in one of your interviews with the Wire, you had mentioned that you hope that the normalization of working from home because of covid, also post-covid, would change working conditions for women because one of the reasons that women were discriminated against was when they asked for more flexible working conditions, they were denied that. Coming to post- pandemic, do you think that change would make it easier for women to work?

I don't know whether it will happen or not, I can't forecast that. But if that were to happen, what I said in the Wire interview was that it will "destigmatize women asking for flexible time." Women

used to be stigmatized for that and used to be discriminated against and this will hopefully destigmatize that element and if this was the only reason that a woman was not being considered for a job, hopefully now people will realise that it is possible to work from home. This is only one element that prevents women from accessing paid leave, there are many others. But, to the extent that this was an element, I hope that will change.

The World Economic Forum just released their Global Gender Gap Report 2021, and it said that the job areas where the gender gap is expected to rise is the disruptive technology sector which has cloud computing, AI, engineering, etc. Also, women's participation in STEM is very low as compared to their participation in the care sector. Do you have any reasons as to why this might be, or why women are not interested in these areas?

It's social conditioning. Right from the beginning—from childhood—parents and society treat girls very differently from boys. Many parents internalise the labour market barriers that women who choose these parts face, and their point is, "Why do you want to do it? It's going to be very difficult for you to find a job," or, "It is not compatible with the pressures of marriage and child-bearing." There's a lot of social conditioning that happens in very early childhood that often makes girls feel like math is not for them, or STEM subjects are not for them. But there's nothing genetic, biological or scientific at all that says that men are better in these subjects than women. There's no such evidence.

There's a gender gap in vaccination in India with more men getting vaccinated than women. Do you think this is because the sex ratio itself is skewed?

States like Kerala have a smaller gender skew ratio, and even the gap in vaccination between men and women is small. This is true for Chhattisgarh as well. So, does the fact that there just are more men than women, play a role here?

So, first of all, the gap in the sex ratio at birth and adult sex ratio is totally different. Normally, if you left it to nature, for every 100 girls, there would be 105 boys. That's because the male infant is more delicate, and more likely to not reach adulthood, than the female infant. And, the reason that nature has 105:100, is so that by the time they become adults, it equalizes roughly to 100:100, which is 50:50. What happens because of sex-selective abortions is that not only does gender gap at childhood become worse, but the disparities that you see in sex ratio at birth don't persist all the way up to adulthood. So, that's, first of all, not the correct way to look at it.

Secondly, the same reason that Kerala sees a better sex ratio at birth is also the same reason that you see more gender equality in vaccination - which is, when society thinks of its women and men as equal citizens with equal rights, you see that attitude towards gender equality permeating in many different spheres. And, in certain other parts of India, this commitment to equality is lower. But in general, in India all over, including in Kerala, when it comes to expenditure on health and education, men are always ahead of the queue than women. That is a fact, you know, that's one of the manifestations of gender inequality. Have you seen this film called The Great Indian Kitchen, has anyone seen it?

Yes, it's a Malayalam film.

Yes, it's based in Kerala. So, the point is that the gendered norms about the

division of work inside the home are very strong all over India. It is to the credit of a Kerala filmmaker that he was able to make this film and show the stark patriarchy that exists inside homes. But, what the gender gap in vaccination shows is something that has been observed in other contexts when it comes to attention to health between men and women. That men—the boy child, the male child, grown men—are always ahead of the queue when it comes to scarce resources. If parents are going to spend on private tuition or private schooling, and they have a boy and a girl, they'd rather spend on the boy than on the girl. Unless, of course, they are very, very rich and they have enough money for both, and they genuinely don't discriminate between girls and boys. And there are many such parents like that, I'm sure many of us are fortunate enough to come from those kinds of families as well. But, an average Indian household does show gender gaps in expenditures on health and education. That's a fact and that same thing is getting manifested now in vaccination.

Ma'am, what are the different economic and cultural factors do you think influence the average Indian family's bias towards boy-children?

There is a phenomenon called son-preference. There are many reasons why in several cultures, and not just in India, families want at least one son. What are those reasons? Some are cultural reasons. For example, the last rites and the belief that your body doesn't attain salvation, or your soul is not freed from the body, unless the last rites are done by the son. That's a cultural reason. There is what is called patrilocality which means that when a marriage takes place, the young couple starts living with the husband's family. So, the wife moves into the husband's family

What does that mean? It has implications for the way in which property is handed down. It's handed down in the male line.

The role that patrilocality plays is that, therefore, the son becomes the guarantee for old-age support because it's the son who is going to be living with the parents as they age. That's the other very big reason. For example, in societies like South Korea, we have seen that with the spread of urbanisation, there's been an increase in female labour force participation. Women started going out and working and earning money, thereby lowering this particular belief that only the son is going to be a source of old-age support. Now the woman, the daughter, is also earning.

So in South Korea now, whoever lives closer to the parents are the ones who take care of whichever set of parents they are supposed to take care of.

So, the roots of son-preference are several. But how do you break those roots? Again, women's economic independence is a very important factor that'll break that son-preference chain. Sons are seen as sources of old-age support. There is no institutional old-age support system to speak of; there are some homes available for the very rich, but otherwise, society as a whole or the government doesn't provide for non-family based old-age support systems at all. So, you're dependent on the family to take care of you when you grow old.