Caste, 'quotas' and discrimination in India: insights from interdisciplinary quantitative research. An interview with Ashwini Deshpande.

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ABSTRACT

Ashwini Deshpande is Professor of Economics at the Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi, India. Her Ph.D. and early publications have been on the international debt crisis of the 1980s. Subsequently, she has been working on the economics of discrimination and affirmative action issues, with a focus on caste and gender in India. She has published extensively in leading scholarly journals. She is the author of "Grammar of Caste: economic discrimination in contemporary India", OUP, hardcover 2011 and paperback 2017, forthcoming; and "Affirmative Action in India", OUP, Oxford India Short Introductions series, 2013. She received the EXIM Bank award for outstanding dissertation (now called the IERA Award) in 1994, and the 2007 VKRV Rao Award for Indian economists under 45.

In this interview she talks about her work on caste-based 'quotas' or 'reservation' (terms for affirmative action in India) and their impact. Her work helps demolish several of the myths around quotas and assumes tremendous significance in a polity where reservation policy faces severe opposition from the elite even as it drives electoral politics in many regions of the country. In view of recent developments on university campuses in India, such quantitative work at the interface of sociology, economics and social psychology, becomes important evidence supporting affirmative action and exposing myths of "merit"-based selection processes and "market rationality".

Further details of Ashwini Deshpande's current and previous work can be found on her department webpage: http://econdse.org/ashwini/.

AUTHOR

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RY: Can you tell me why you took up caste as an Economist? Why was it important?

AD: In terms of my personal journey, that choice was serendipitous, in the sense that I didn't aim to start with studying caste. My PhD was about the international debt crisis of the 1980s. And it was not an empirical one at all. It was pure theory for the most part. So I was basically looking at theoretical models of why countries borrowed the heavy amounts that they did, the role of the transnational banks and what impact high level of debt can have on domestic economy of the indebted nations. [There was a] very small section with data because I just wanted to make sure that conclusions of my models are standing up to scrutiny.

And when I sent one of the chapters [as a journal article] for publication, one of the referees for that paper happened to be William Darity Jr. who is now at Duke University and works on racial inequality. He also has a book on loan pushing by transnational banks and that's the book I'd referred to for that particular paper. He contacted me and said he liked the paper. We got talking and he asked if I would be interested in examining caste inequalities. It seemed like a really strange question to me at the time because, first of all, that was not my area of work at all and additionally, fifteen years back, Indian economists didn't really work on social inequalities or social group identities. For both reasons I said that it seemed like something very far removed from the scope of my training basically. It was something of interest in general, but it wasn't something that I thought I had any expertise in, in terms of pursuing it academically.

As it happened, I ended up going for a postdoctoral fellowship for 2 years to UNC [i.e. the] University of North Carolina. William Darity used to be at Chapel Hill, and even when I went there I thought I was just, maybe, going to write one paper on caste because, you know, he was keen. I'd carried my debt work with me because I thought that that was going to be the main focus of my work during my time there. I soon realised that research on caste is not something that one does on the side while one is doing other things. And this was especially true for me, as I didn't have a rigorous understanding of what the caste system was. I knew broadly the contours of what caste meant, but I had no idea of what scholarship there was, so I had to literally learn from scratch.

RY: So what sort of things does an Economist learn in a Master's programme? For example, is there anything that approaches sociology?

AD: *Now* it's very different. I am, myself, teaching a course on the 'Economics of Discrimination' where I introduce students to the idea of discrimination based on social identity. But at the time when I studied economics, the focus was on overall poverty or inequality. We examined differences between the rich and the poor or between class distinctions or the spread i.e. the distribution of income, which is 'inequality'. We studied how to identify the poor, what are the causes of poverty, what are the consequences of poverty, etc. That is, overall population related issues.

The examination of the role of social identities in mediating economic outcomes is now very common place. In any economics paper or any economics class you would necessarily talk about social identity-based differences. But at the time when I did my MA which is in mid-1980s [the idea was that] social identity was something that sociologists were concerned with.

RY: So what are some of the other questions around social identity that have been taken up by economists in the Indian context?

AD: There is a whole branch in economics called Feminist Economics, for example, that I talk about that a little bit in the book as well (*The Grammar of Caste*). Basically, it is theory that is developed in the West, but now many Indian Economists use it as well. The idea is that …there are activities that are in the paid or what is called the 'productive' part of the economy, which is work that you do outside of the home for which you get paid or [it could] even [be work that] you do inside the home. It would still get counted as a part of 'national income', as productive economic activity. But there is a large part of work that people do that is in the so-called 'reproductive' sphere. Now reproductive sphere doesn't only relate to child bearing. The reproductive economy encompasses all activities that are related to child bearing, care of children as well as the elderly. So that will include housework like cooking, cleaning and giving birth and taking care of children and so forth. Feminist economists argue that unless this kind of work is done, society cannot reproduce itself. That is, you can't have some people working in the labour force unless you have other people doing this work.

So, gender discrimination happens because people who are in the 'productive' segment of the economy are rewarded for being in the productive segment, but individuals who work in the reproductive part of the economy are not. Feminist economists think of the productive and reproductive parts as two parts of the same economy whereas a more conventional view would say, well, productive part is the economic part whereas the reproductive part is a part of the social domain, not economic. Individuals who predominantly spend their time in the reproductive part of the economy get penalised for being in the reproductive part, whereas, individuals who work predominantly in the productive part get rewarded for being in the productive part.

And women who try to do both have to bear the double burden of work in the productive as well as the reproductive economies. The labour market will penalise them: women may not be hired because of the belief that they are going to have children etc. Even if they are hired they may not get promotions so easily because of the idea that they will be busy with their families and so on and so forth. So opportunities might be denied to them. Both at the level of entry and also subsequently. So that is a whole different branch of economics called feminist economics.

In 1975, there was a report that was commissioned by the government of India: it was called *Towards Equality*. That was the first landmark report that brought into focus issues of economic discrimination, disparities between men and women.

RY: You have worked on liberalisation and globalisation. Would you say that there are certain patterns that have emerged, changes that have upset traditional caste dynamics in an economic sense?

AD: So there is a big debate within the Dalit community and the tribal community… whether globalisation and liberalisation are going to be emancipatory forces for the Dalit and other marginalised communities.

People like Gail Omvedt and Chandra Bhan Prasad have consistently argued that globalisation and liberalisation are going to be emancipatory and liberatory forces for Dalits. The idea is that they are changing the rules of the game in several ways. One, as multinational corporations are likely to come in through liberalisation and privatisation they don't necessarily care about caste hierarchies within the country and so in their hiring practices they are likely to be less discriminatory.

The other argument is that they are bringing in new *forms* of work – things that didn't earlier exist in the Indian economy – and these new forms of work have no traditional caste counterparts at all. There [are] new kinds of technologies that do not depend on any kind of traditional division of labour according to the caste system, etc. So the chances – if one had the requisite qualifications – of competing for any of these new kinds of jobs in the new economy are equivalent regardless of [an] individual's caste or tribal or ethnic or gender status. Additionally, private capital is going to play a predominant role, foreign capital is going to play predominant role and so on. For all of these reasons the probability that Dalits, or, tribals or other traditionally marginalised groups will be particularly excluded is low. That is one kind of argument. That… people get a chance to compete on an equal footing because old hierarchies are going to get disoriented.

The counter argument to this is that, yes, new kinds of jobs are going to come in except, that even if multinational corporations are hiring they are typically hiring through their Indian personnel. So unless there are very strong anti-discriminatory guidelines given from the top, people on the ground who are actually doing the hiring are going to be biased in the same way that they would be in domestic companies. And so their individual biases which would be caste prejudice, prejudice against tribals or women will continue to manifest themselves. Thus, there is no reason to believe that the hiring practices are going to be drastically different because these are multinational companies.

The other argument is that the kinds of new jobs that open up are jobs that require English language and particularly, Mathematics and scientific skills; areas in which Dalits are traditionally disadvantaged. Now, of course, the counter-argument to this is that Dalits might not immediately be able to take advantage, but if these jobs exist then, over time, it has an incentive effect. Dalits will want to take advantage of this and they will want to acquire education. But then you have to look at discrimination in education. Even at the same level, the quality is not identical, so, when they are being hired, employers will not view the same quantity of education as the same quality.

And lastly, the argument is that, foreign employers, when they go to new countries, don't want to rock the

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boat too badly. If there are certain practices going on there is no reason for them to say, 'don't discriminate on the basis of caste'. If everyone discriminates on the basis of caste and that practice has been going on for decades, for centuries, why change the hiring practices? So, for all of these reasons, these new jobs, the new economy that is getting introduced through globalisation *may* not actually be such an emancipatory force. Of course, these are arguments you have to then prove empirically …I have done some work on these issues.

RY: Yes, I saw the work; I've seen your work with Katherine Newman and her book with Sukhdeo Thorat[1]. That's what you are doing: examining the assumption of 'rationality' in the market and it doesn't seem to be there. Right?

AD: I have another paper which is going to come out in another book which looks at foreign direct investment and whether the districts that have higher foreign direct investment are the districts with lower wage gaps between castes. If this argument [of markets being rational] is true then we should see some pattern here. Right? We should see that districts with higher foreign direct investment should have lower caste gaps. But we don't see that.

RY: Can you tell me a little bit more about some of your main findings? About the way we assume merit is what's going to count in the market, but then it doesn't. So how did you 'measure' this attitude?

AD: In my work with Katherine Newman we discussed how employers really believe that they are hiring according to merit. But their views about what constitutes "merit" [are] very strongly shaped by caste and gender, for example, if not by other criteria such as region. Everything in India is complicated...so it's not only caste that becomes the basis of discrimination.

RY: Yes, so many different ways of discriminating…

AD: But hiring managers...are not lying; they truly believe that they are strictly hiring according to merit. But they are unable to distinguish between the social identity of the person and 'merit'. So there are a lot of stereotypes that play in their minds as they look for "meritorious" students.

RY: "good" families, for example? This is also discussed in Thorat and Newman's book…

AD: Yes, "good" family. 'Family background' is a key variable and so when they look at family background then what they don't realise is that they are moving attention away from individual merit and are really looking at inherited factors.

RY: When you unpack the idea of the "good" family then what are the kinds of attributes that they are looking for?

AD: They ask about father's education, mother's education, and so forth. But the whole idea of individual merit in meritocratic societies is precisely that individuals have merit regardless of what their parents do. So [even] an individual person whose father is an alcoholic, [or, a] serial killer, a rapist, or whatever, should still have a chance to succeed. Right? But the minute you bring family background into the picture such an individual will be doomed for failure just because his father happened to be …these things. What meritocracy means is that if you've got what it takes to succeed then you should have the opportunity to succeed. To at least try, to at least compete though competition itself is a different story because other people are also competing... What we lack in India, as well as in several other countries, is 'equal opportunity'. Because our opportunities are very strongly conditioned by who our parents are, what our caste is and what our gender is and so on and so forth.

RY: And then this is also related to your work on affirmative action because there are these assumptions, for example, that you don't need reservation in the private sector because they are only looking at "merit". So the assumption is that there is no way you will lose out because of your caste. Similarly, there are all these arguments against reservation in higher education. Can you also tell me about your work on the kind of discrimination that beneficiaries [of reservation in higher education] face?

AD: As you know, I am a strong believer in affirmative action because it breaks this cycle that I was talking about earlier; which is, family background being a strong condition for upward mobility. So affirmative action allows individuals from disadvantaged family backgrounds an opportunity to succeed; it levels, to some extent, opportunity. Of course, it's too little because the bigger gaps in opportunity are related to

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[1] This is a book edited by Sukhdeo Thorat and Katherine S Newman called *Blocked by Caste* (Thorat and Newman 2010).

wealth inequalities which affirmative action doesn't touch at all. So all it does is give some preferential access in a small segment of jobs, in a small segment of education, etc. So actually to think about it, it's a very small step. But the controversy over it is so strong that you'd think it's the end of the world. As if everything is being redistributed towards Dalits...which isn't true. It's very little.

RY: You mention in your writing that this was your reason for taking it up, because the controversy was turning so violent and ugly.

AD: Yes. So first of all you realise that despite the fuss that's made over quotas in India, it actually affects a very narrow part of the economy. Even that small amount of redistribution creates such an antagonistic protest. So people are unhappy and they argue that merit is going to come crashing down and all the rest of it. But I think that first of all, the 'reduction in merit' argument doesn't hold water. I have a study of the Indian Railways, along with Thomas Weisskopf, which is the only study that looks at the productivity impact of affirmative action. So the question that we are asking deals with the Indian railways, which is the largest employer in the public sector in India. Actually, it's amongst the largest employers anywhere in the world.

We have data for 23 years and what we have tried to do in that paper is to see whether higher proportion of SC/ST[2] employees [due to quotas] is associated with lower productivity. There are standard economic techniques that we used to measure productivity. And we find that productivity is not systematically related to proportion of SC/ST employees at all. There are other reasons for productivity to go up and down. But it has nothing to do with reservation.

RY: So if you control for other variables reservation does not seem to be a factor affecting productivity?

AD: Yes. Not only that, we find that under certain conditions [a higher] proportion of SC/ST employees in 'A' and 'B' categories of jobs – these are the top most decision-making jobs – actually has a positive effect on productivity. Which means that the greater the proportion of officers and managers who come from

reserved categories, the greater will be – controlling for other things – the productivity.

RY: And you observed this for a number of years?

AD: Yes. Of course, we only have the data; we don't know why this is happening, but we have some hypotheses. One of them is that individuals from marginalised groups who are in decision making bodies and who come in through policies such as affirmative action are very aware of the fact that their colleagues and everybody else is waiting for them to fail. There is a lot of antipathy towards reservation. And therefore they work extra hard to prove that they are as good. So levels of motivations among SC/ST decision-makers are typically higher. This has been observed, for example, for women who are in corporate boardrooms in the West. There are studies for the United States and Europe where it is found that women who are in the corporate work extra hard because they know that the others are waiting for them to fail. The other reason could be that lower level employees who are Dalits are motivated to work harder because now they can see that their bosses are Dalit. So they feel a sort of pride or they feel a connection.

RY: Or, they see the possibility of upward mobility because their bosses are Dalits?

AD: …it somehow motivates them. Another mechanism could be that given the different family backgrounds of Dalits and non-Dalits… they have grown up in very different environments, and what that does often is it enables different kinds of problem solving skills. This is something that is observed for men and women too. Because of their different social conditioning, women, for example, are very good at multi-tasking. Because that's just what women have to do.

So the idea is that when people from diverse backgrounds are brought together to lead an organisation, then the diversity from their earlier backgrounds allows them to exhibit different kinds of skills at the workplace and that's good in terms of boosting the productivity. These are the different mechanisms that are possible. All of these could be responsible or one could be; we don't know for sure.

Affirmative action breaks the connection between family background and opportunity so it gives somewhat of a level playing field. Secondly, it doesn't have an adverse impact on productivity of enterprises. There are other studies that have looked at education;

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[2] 'SC' stands for Scheduled Castes and 'ST' for Scheduled Tribes. These are administrative categories used by the Indian state. The category, 'Scheduled Castes', refers to formerly untouchable communities. http://ncsc.nic.in/pages/view/73/68-introduction, http://tribal.nic.in/Content/DefinitionpRrofiles.aspx.

again, they don't find any adverse impact on education institutions.

In India, because it is targeted towards government sector and it's targeted towards higher education, affirmative action kicks in at a point where already a lot of differentiation has taken place. If you look at the number of people entering college – and it's anyway a very small number if you look at it as a percentage of the age group – thirty percent of the age group enters college, which is really low compared to western countries, for example. So a lot of people argue that to have quotas at the higher education level is too late. A lot of differentiation has already happened. And that argument is absolutely correct. People drop out earlier in education because of poverty, because of discrimination and because of [other] adverse circumstances. So what's the point in having a policy that is coming in so late by the time a lot of problems have already happened?

That argument is correct. But my response is that [let's] have both [interventions during schooling to equalise access and quality of pre-college education as well as quotas in higher education] Why does it have to be either/or? Equalise opportunity at the primary level too...the advantage of having affirmative action at the higher level is that even though it's targeted at a very elite part of the population, it desegregates the elite. It makes the elite more representative of the population and that in itself has a very huge symbolic effect. For Dalits to feel that there are IAS/IPS officers, professors...even though the quotas are not fully filled there is at least one segment. That has a huge symbolic impact.

RY: And does it also have an effect on decision-making and how things are implemented?

AD: That will happen when the quotas are fully filled. We are not there yet. But even before that happens, symbolic impact is important.

RY: In 2015, I was doing my fieldwork in a city in Madhya Pradesh[3] and the collector of the city had been invited for Republic Day[4] celebrations. He was a tall, fair, upper caste man and an upper caste woman teacher remarked in front of everyone that all said and done it doesn't look nice to have OBCs or SC/STs

occupying the position of a Collector! So the symbolic value would seem to be important [in challenging such views].

AD: So affirmative action in my opinion is a good thing. And though I haven't looked at political quotas, there is a lot of work that looks at that and there are very substantial redistributive effects found for both women's reservations and caste based [ones].

RY: You actually raised some questions about the creamy layer based on your findings?

AD: No, no, no, there is a creamy layer... it exists among all communities. The question is whether overcoming class disadvantage or economic disadvantage results in a lowering of discrimination.

RY: So "creamy-ness" is only defined in terms of class?

AD: Yes, income. There are 6 criteria – income, parental education, whether parents are first class government officers, land ownership and so on. But the point is that when we look at labour market discrimination against Dalits, we find that even after you control for all these class characteristics Dalits still face discrimination. Which means that just being in the creamy layer is not sufficient to overcome discrimination, because the stigma of untouchability is still pretty strong. For OBCs the creamy layer argument makes sense because they are not stigmatised the way Dalits are. But, for Dalits, my argument would be that if they are in the creamy layer don't give them economic benefits, but reservations is a different story. I'd still argue for reservations for the creamy layer among Dalits. Okay, take away the fee concessions or the free uniform, but keep the quota benefits [because] the fact that they belong to the creamy layer is still not going to take away discrimination in the labour market. So why take them off quotas?

RY: So it doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing kind of approach. Now that you have worked in this area for a long time do you think producing this kind of scholarship makes any difference to discourses in and beyond academia?

AD: I think it makes a huge difference. When I returned from the US and wanted to teach a course called 'Economics of Discrimination' there were a lot of raised eyebrows and my colleagues asked, 'what will you teach in this course? This is not mainstream economics', etc. but if I were to introduce something like that now,

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[3] A state in India.
[4] On 26 January, 1950 the Constitution of India came into effect. That day is celebrated as Republic Day in the country.

nobody would be surprised at this kind of a course. It is considered very much a part of economics. Today, it would be *very* difficult not to talk about caste, I think. To pretend that caste doesn't matter, or, there is really not an issue is not possible. Whether there is discrimination or not, is one thing. But, whether to study it or not, is different. I am talking about Economics departments; to say that caste is not something that needs to be studied because it doesn't affect economic decisions is not possible.

RY: And have there been changes in the way Dalit faculty or students are treated? I don't mean just because of this scholarship…

AD: No, no. That sort of thing is much harder to change. For research to change that is a tall order. To think that research about something will change what happens, is difficult. It does lead to discussions about it. There is a sufficiently big body of work that has put caste centre stage. So now if one is doing an empirical paper on India, on poverty, etc., it would very naive not to look at caste differences. So in that sense inquiry into the discipline has already shifted.

RY: How about the policy making process? When, for example, something like the 'Socioeconomic and Caste Census' (SECC) happens or other kinds of data collection exercises, what sort of links does academic work have with such policymaking exercises? What kind of role do academics have today in the Indian context in policy making? When the SECC was designed were academics involved?

AD: Academics have a role in policy making for sure. But, in the SECC, I don't think any academics were involved.

RY: What about older data collection exercises? What role have academics played in design and execution?

AD: Right. For example, the National Sample Survey (NSS) is the oldest data collection exercise. It has always had economists advising them. They are very much part of the methodology. A second very big data source which is increasingly being used is the India Human Development Survey. The idea of making such a database available is due to two sociologists, one Indian, one American. There have been two rounds [of data collection]. The first one was collected in 2004-05 and second one in 2011-12 and third one is also out now. Many of us use it; it's a very, very popular source of data, very good. And it's a brainchild of academics.

Now the SECC – is a Ministry of Rural Development initiative…

RY: The methodology adopted for that census has been criticised which is why I would like to know what you think about it. All the data has not been released and what has been released does not offer the break up across castes. For example, if they are talking about female headed households or property ownership (houses, vehicles, etc.) they do not say how these households are distributed across caste groups. So it doesn't seem to really help…

AD: I don't know if any academics were involved. I wasn't. In terms of methodology, it's a census. So it's supposed to look at every Indian. The whole idea was that it will give *jati* level data. But that's not what they have released.

RY: They say they have collected it but they haven't released it.

AD: And I don't know if they will ever release it. In any case, SECC isn't the database that academics use. NSS is what we use. It is a well-known and well established data collection exercise. It has these administrative categories: Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Other Backward Classes and so on. There is also the IHDS which I mentioned earlier.

RY: The reason I am asking is because you do mention that there isn't enough data that allows you to look at the details of economic inequality.

AD: No, we don't have *jati* level data… so you have data for all STs, for example. But it still tells you quite a bit. All my work has been using aggregate data. Otherwise you will be looking at 6000 *jati*s. So I know that many sociologists in India don't think of this as kosher. Unless we know every single *jati* separately we don't know anything. I don't subscribe to that view. I think larger patterns are very useful. I don't agree with the view that just because there is no *jati* level data that data is not informative. I know that this is a very strong view in India but I don't accept it. I think it's (aggregate data) very instructive.

RY: This is something that you have mentioned, and a former professor of mine used to say this too, that there isn't enough quantitative sociological work in India.

AD: Engagement with quantitative data in sociology is virtually zero [in India]. Indian sociologists don't believe

in quantitative sociology. I know literally two who work with quantitative data: Satish Deshpande and Divya Vaid. These are literally the two people that I know who look at numbers.

RY: So we need to have two things on the agenda then, generating quantitative data, and engaging with existing data sets. Right?

AD: Economists, you don't need to convince. But, with sociologists, it's a larger ideological struggle. I think there are many people who have the attitude that 'SC' or 'ST' is an aggregate group and they think, what's the point of looking at such data? That's a very powerful argument used by sociologists. The minute you present any results that use the categories Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, etc. they will ask, what do these categories mean? Because even within Scheduled Caste there are so many *jati*s and we need to look at every *jati* separately. I get that point; I am not arguing with it...but if you have data that is too disaggregated then you don't know what the larger picture is. In order to generate the larger picture you need aggregated data.

Indian sociologists – not every single one – but, to a large extent, are pretty *averse* to using it. My point is, [let's] look at ethnographic data, look at the quantitative data, and put it together. I don't look at it as either/or.

RY: If we had to engage with quantitative work and big data, are our Undergraduate and Postgraduate programmes prepared to train students in quantitative sociology?

AD: Economics is, but, Sociology isn't. In India it's a long way to go…

RY: Can you tell me something about this WIDER[5] project that you have been working on recently?

AD: That project looks at stigma related to affirmative action. The idea is that students who get into universities through quotas get stigmatised because they are quota-recipients. So in addition to caste [-based discrimination], there is the added stigma that if they come through quotas they must be incompetent. So I studied whether they internalize these ideas and found that they don't.

RY: How exactly did you study this?

AD: Using social psychology. It has methodologies that measure this kind of thing. Earlier the idea was that stigmatised individuals internalise the stigma that other people associate with [their social identity]. For example, the stigma associated with women could be that they are not bright and so women may also internalise this and begin to believe that [evaluation of themselves]. In social-psychology there is something called a 'stereotype threat', which is, that if you remind a member of a group that suffers a negative stereotype about that stereotype then the performance of that person will shift in the direction of the stereotype. For example, I am a woman and the stereotype is that women are bad at Math. So if you remind me of the stereotype and then immediately give me a test, I will do worse than if you hadn't reminded me of the stereotype. It is called 'priming'; so if the stereotype is that you will do worse then you will do worse because of the priming (the reminder). Now social psychology distinguishes between 'externalisation' and 'internalisation'. Externalisation basically means that people will attribute a particular negative stereotype. Internalisation means that the group that is stigmatised accepts that view. So if men think women are bad at Math that is externalisation and if women also think that they are bad at Math [because of this stereotype] then that is internalisation.

There are survey questionnaires used in social psychology, again used in the US, that disentangle whether the stigma is through externalisation and whether it has also been internalised. What I did was that I examined the questionnaires used in these studies and reframed those that were relevant to the Indian context. In language, and using terminology, that Indian students will easily identify with. Then I had a series of externalisation questions and a series of internalisation questions and jumbled them up so the respondent wouldn't see a pattern.

Now take the externalisation versus internalisation question. Supposing you think that I am bad at Math and I don't think so then how does it matter whether you think so or not? It does because the fact that I am aware that you think I am bad at Math increases the pressure on me. That is called the 'academic performance burden'. So externalisation is also a problem in the sense that you think that I am bad, but, if I had internalised [your evaluation] that would be even worse.

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[5] It is the UNU-WIDER that is, the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research. https://www.wider.unu.edu/

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I did an attitude survey in colleges of Delhi University administering a questionnaire which had externalisation and internalisation questions and which also looks at this academic performance burden. Does the externalisation make the recipients of affirmative action more pressurised? I do find externalisation i.e., peers do stigmatise beneficiaries. I find some evidence of increased academic performance burden; that is, beneficiaries feel compelled to perform better because they know that they are being judged, but I find no evidence of internalisation. So they don't think that they are bad or worse, but they are aware that others think they are worse.

What I have done in this paper is to disentangle internalisation and externalisation. It's a totally new area of work. And while I've looked at sociology, now I've moved a little bit in a different direction, toward social psychology. I will continue to engage sociology, but I find social psychology is doing fabulous work for discrimination studies. They have some insights which discrimination studies could benefit from. It has the tools to address the controversies around quotas that we have [in India right now].

RY: Finally, I'd like to know how you began to write for popular media. You have written for newspapers etc.; was it a conscious decision? And you have made these pieces quite accessible too.

AD: Thank you. I started writing as an undergrad student on debt etc. This was in the 1990s. I enjoy writing popular pieces. My father had this ability; I don't possess a tenth or hundredth of his ability. I saw him straddle both these worlds – this very, very complicated world of academics and the straightforward way of talking to people. It's a really great quality and I am nowhere close to where he was, but it may have rubbed off. I just enjoy popular writing.