

“Even when class conditions are equalised, caste seems to have an independent effect on future life outcomes” – Ashwini Deshpande

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In November **Professor Ashwini Deshpande** presented a new paper on caste, class and social mobility to an audience of academics and researchers at the South Asia Centre. After the seminar she spoke to **Sonali Campion** about the survey design for the paper, its initial findings and the challenge of measuring social mobility among women.



Could you start by outlining the main aims of this research, and how you designed the survey?

The idea behind the project was to quantify relative mobility because at the point where I started working on this, there weren't any panel data sets that would allow me to measure relative mobility in terms of an interpersonal comparison. One could do intergenerational comparisons, but interpersonal comparisons reveal a lot about the role of different social identity factors, for example the family background or the circumstances under which individuals are born and the role of these factors in determining outcomes.

Given that data were not available, I decided to conduct a retrospective survey. This involved contacting individuals who had graduated from high school in a particular year, and interviewing them 10 to 12 years on. Most individuals have finished studying and they are in the job market by this time. They may not be in their final jobs but their positions will give a fairly good indicator of the trajectories they are on. In an ideal world one would have liked to contact those who are 45 years old, but then their school records would be so far back that it would be hard to access them. I started thinking about this project in 2013, so I chose the batch of 2003 because I knew that by the time the survey rolled out it would be 2014 and it would take several months to complete because of the tricky nature of this data collection.

The idea was to disentangle the role of class as a factor in circumstances or birth conditions from caste as a factor in circumstances or birth conditions. They overlap considerably so you can never say it's *only* caste or *only* class because both go hand to a large extent. However, my main findings show even when a lot of the class conditions are equalised, caste seems to have an independent effect on future life outcomes. The point at which the differences are really stark is performance in the school leaving examination (Class 12). From then on the differences just keep multiplying.

How did you separate the caste and the class impacts?

I collected information on parental backgrounds, including both father and mother's education and occupation. I collected information on the assets in their home as well as land/property ownership. These were imperfect measures because they could have been acquired after the child was born, but it still serves as a rough comparison. I believe that to the extent it is possible I've controlled for the class background of these individuals.



Ashwini Deshpande speaking at the South Asia Centre. Credit: Sonali Campion

I divided the sample into the poorest 40%, the middle 40% and the top 20%. This is a completely arbitrary classification; it's just a way of splitting the sample. I found that even when I compare poor Brahmins with poor Dalits, and middle class Brahmins with middle class Dalits etc. there are differences that are pretty stark. I have information on a number of caste categories, but the most significant and persistent difference is between the Brahmins at the top end of the upper castes, and the Dalits at the bottommost end of the caste hierarchy. The other differences are sometimes significant but it's these two ends of the caste hierarchy where the differences seem to persist even when class conditions are equalised. Most national or macro data sets do not allow us to break up the upper castes to Brahmins and other upper castes, so this nuance is not highlighted.

We see significant disparities between Muslims and Hindus as well. I haven't taken Hindus as a homogeneous group so you can actually see how Muslims are placed in relation to the caste hierarchy within Hinduism and they are pretty close to the bottom. This broadly confirms ideas that people already had.

This research is obviously ongoing but has important implications for debates on affirmative action and policymaking. What are the insights in this area?

I have a body of research on affirmative action already, so I have developed views on these policies through that work. With this I only look at why people don't use affirmative action, even when they are eligible – which will form the basis for a separate paper. In the affirmative action literature both in India and abroad there is this view that's gaining ground, namely that not only is affirmative action unfair to the non-beneficiaries – because it deprives the privileged group of these positions – but it's also harmful for the beneficiaries because it doubly stigmatises them. They are already stigmatised due to their social identities, and in addition to being a Dalit or a black person or whatever the marginalised identity that they might possess, because they are beneficiaries of affirmative action in the institutions that they go to, they are seen as less capable and doubts are made about their ability to work or to study and so on.

Based upon my other work I have questioned this argument. In this particular survey I asked individuals who are eligible to benefit from affirmative action if they had used it even once in their lives, for education or for jobs. All those who said that they had never used it I then asked them why. I found that of those who do not use quotas ever, only 17% fear stigmatisation. The bulk of non-use comes from procedural difficulties that are created by the administrators and institutions who are reluctant to give them these places in the first place. They have to implement the policy so they create hurdles in the paths of those that are legitimately entitled to use them. Bureaucrats will tell Dalit applicants that their caste certificate is not valid, or ask for bribes and so on. They don't want to give these places to those who are eligible so they'll find ways of preventing the correct use.

This survey focuses on the trajectories of young men. What are the barriers to studying women and are

there alternative routes to measuring social mobility among women?

Typically adult women who are in the working age group – whether they are working outside the home or not – is they are married. The legal age for marriage in India is 18. It's not uncommon for girls to get married before 18 and marriage is almost universal in India. By the time a woman is 28 years old, she's not only married but she's had at least a couple of kids. So a comparison like this – which looks at parents and children – is very hard to do with women: they have moved to their marital home, they have a different surname and so on.

That's the reason I could not include women, but I didn't want to miss the gender angle completely because it doesn't present a true picture. I have therefore gathered information on the wives and sisters of the men I spoke to. I don't know yet what I'm going to see in the data but that is an avenue I'm exploring.

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About the Author

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, as well as on aspects of the Chinese economy: role of FDI in the reform process, regional disparities and gender discrimination. She has published extensively in leading scholarly journals. She is the author of [Grammar of Caste: economic discrimination in contemporary India](#) (2011) and [Affirmative Action in India](#) (2013).



She is the editor of: [Boundaries of Clan and Color: Transnational studies of inter-group disparity](#), along with William Darity, Jr. (2003); [Globalization and Development: A Handbook of New Perspectives](#) (2007); [Capital without borders: challenges to development](#) (2010); and [Global Economic Crisis and the developing world](#), with Keith Nurse (2012).

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