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### **Indian honour at Harvard**

GITA GOPINATH WHO JOINED HARVARD UNIVERSITY'S ECONOMICS DEPARTMENT AS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IN 2005 HAS EARNED THE DISTINCTION OF BECOMING THE THIRD WOMAN AND THE FIRST INDIAN AFTER NOBEL LAUREATE AMARTYA SEN, TO RECEIVE THE HONOUR OF A TENURED PROFESSOR. SHE SPEAKS TO MANASH PRATIM GOHAIN

#### **What has been your journey to Harvard like**

My foray into economics was accidental. I was a science student and my father wanted me to be an IAS officer. He decided that economics is the subject for me to achieve that goal. I always wanted to study in the best places and so came all the way from Mysore to study at Lady Shri Ram College (LSR) in Delhi. After LSR I pursued my Masters at Delhi School of Economics. It was at LSR I fell in love with economics and told my father that I do not want to be an IAS officer but instead want to pursue academics. I chose University of Washington instead of Harvard for my higher studies as the latter was not offering me any scholarships. Then I enrolled into Princeton University for my PhD with a full scholarship. My first job was at the University of Chicago. At Harvard I was initially offered a faculty position for six months.

#### **What is the difference between institutions of higher learning in India and the US**

The biggest difference is in the relationship among professors and students. In the US students and professors interact as peers and the

taught are never made to feel that they are less special or less knowledgeable than the ones who teach.

### **Can you share something about your interest in international economics**

I was drawn towards international economics as it was the problem of the day and India was going through a lean patch economically then. Thereafter, it became my passion and today my research is on international prices and exchange rates.

### **Despite so many smart economists in the corridors of high learning, how is that the world has recently witnessed one of the worst economic downturns and is still struggling to cope**

There are two reasons that have attributed to the downturn the disconnect between the academic and real world and a general sense of complacency. But the positive thing is that our financial mechanisms are hardy and we have responded well. Economics is a social science where there is a human dimension, which is why things can often go wrong.

### **What is your take on the present undergraduate education system in India**

There is a major gap in terms of supply of quality. There are a few places where quality undergraduate courses are on offer, but they are not sufficient. Opening our doors to foreign educational institutions is hence the need of the hour. I hear that some of the best institutions in the world are wanting to collaborate with Indian educational institutions.

### **What is the difference between an Indian undergraduate student of economics and an average Harvard student**

Talent wise nothing. But the approach towards education is making a sizeable difference. At Harvard in the first year one does not study any economics. Instead the student studies a range of subjects from science to history to figure out what he/she is good at, which in my opinion is a good idea. In India (I do not know if this has changed now), we have set classes for students whereas at Harvard there is a lot of flexibility. For instance students of mathematics can opt for a mathematics class that is best suited to his/her ability. We need to incorporate this element of flexibility if we want to effectively transform our undergraduate system of education.



*Gita Gopinath*