

# OBITUARY

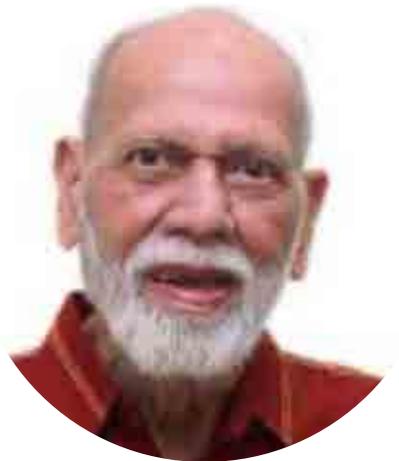
# A Tribute to **Dr. L. K. Deshpande**

(1/04/1933- 12/09/2020)

Director of the Department of Economics, Mumbai  
University, (Now MSEPP)

***Suchita Krishnaprasad***

Department of Economics, Elphinstone College,  
Mumbai  
drsuck@gmail.com



“We are all bargainers...!” he said and this was followed by a near meditative pause. As if he wanted us to let the statement fully sink in the minds of his students. Later, talking about the tactics in collective bargaining, he asked, what would we do if while driving the car in the correct lane, we found another car racing towards us from the ‘wrong’ side? Would we continue to ‘follow the lane’, because after all we were not in the wrong, or would we dodge the collision by ‘violating the lane’? What followed was yet another statement worth a pause.. “What everyone does, is fair!” It was the era of independent unions in and around Mumbai and the practitioners in industrial relations were trying to understand the aggressive leadership of the

belligerent Dr. Datta Samant, who had by then captured the industrial belt of Thane–Belapur region as the loudest voice of the workers, and this professor in M.A. class had summed up the topic of ‘Tactics in Collective Bargaining’ by drawing our attention to the phenomenon closer home!

It was the beginning of academic year 1979–80. And in the process of selecting my two electives, as a student of M.A. (part I), I had been attending classes of several optional papers. And when I attended that class on Collective Bargaining I just mentioned, I decided that labour economics would certainly be one of my options, and that I was never going to miss any lecture by Dr. L. K. Deshpande, or LK as he was

mentioned, the tall, lanky and well-dressed gentleman who continued to inspire his students in his unique style.

What followed was a bond of respect, affection, concern and guidance that only evolved over the past four decades, not just with LK, but with his entire family in varying degrees. And it is a rich personal experience for me, like many of his students.

As an astute academician who always struck a balance between abstraction and empiricism as well as the Right and the Left, he had some path-breaking contributions to his credit. This includes the study of Mumbai Labour Market (1972-76) based on a huge sample of 6,000 workers, formal and informal sectors included, wherein he allowed the data to speak of how the phenomenon of segmentation in the labour market could be attributed to the very source of labour supply itself. Much later as globalisation had begun to set in, there was another pioneering study covering several Indian States assessing labour market flexibility in India. It was based on a humongous data, anyone else could have perhaps

messed it up. It took the meticulous attention and untiring efforts of the Deshpandes (L.K. & Sudha) to put it in perspective and understand how, “too much labour flexibility may be as bad as too little!”.. a statement which is illusive in its simplicity but sums up succinctly the natural proclivities of LK towards avoiding any rhetoric and extreme ideological positions.

The Deshpandes were also involved in several studies related to Mumbai. LK played a key role in initiating “Bombay First”, a think tank of Brihanmumbai Mahanagar Palika (BMC), for which he was honoured by the BMC. Often these meetings brought him to south Mumbai. And whenever he had some time to chat there was Fish n Chips or roti kebab rolls at Samovar, which was bang opposite Elphinstone College where I worked.

Elphinstone College was yet another context for my bond with the Deshpandes. As the esteemed alumni of the college, they always honoured any invitation I was privileged to send them as a coordinator of NAAC or Secretary of The Elphinstonian Society.

The Deshpandes made a stunning couple. I still recall the images of LK lingering in the lecture complex at Vidyanagari, waiting for Sudha to finish her class after which they would head together for a cup of tea. LK was fond of reading, music and good food and he found a perfect companion in Sudha. I have enjoyed their hospitality like many other students of his... Meals cooked with heart and served with love along with innumerable anecdotes from their valuable experiences. The couple must have certainly been the life of several heart-warming get-togethers across the globe, the joy and comradeship of which must have been lifted to new heights with Sudha, an acknowledged AIR vocalist, rendering songs on requests! She once gifted me with recordings of these songs captured in an audio CD, and it remains my treasure.

LK was truly magnanimous. I quote two instances from a piece recently published in the EPW authored by my guru-bandhu, Prof. K. R. Shyam Sundar. LK shared his wealth of data gathered during the Bombay Labour Markets study with Mark Holmstrom who acknowledged this very rare

act of generosity in academia in his book *Industry and Inequality: The Social Anthropology of Indian Labour* (1985). In another instance he encouraged Dilip Nachane to apply for the post of professor in the department of economics, for which he himself was a contender! It was not at all surprising that the duo, that often reminded my friend Shyam Sundar of the Webbs, worked tirelessly in the formative years of the IHD, with absolutely no pecuniary expectations.

He was utterly democratic at heart. His ease and disarming sense of humour peeping through the twinkle in his eyes made him a delightful practitioner of democracy. He never imposed his opinion on the work of his students. He functioned as a catalyst allowing them to discover and explore on their own. My first published paper was in fact an extended version of a response I had written and shared with Sir, after I had read a piece by Gurcharan Das in a newspaper justifying large scale VRS and the responsibility of the State to retrain the workers. He saw a seed of a research paper in it, and asked me to work. That presentation

led to a few more invitations for me in the immediate future.

Free thinking was the only precondition if you were to work with him, which meant freedom from any dogma and freedom to be passionate about the work. He was himself free from need for approval or recounting the accolades which naturally flowed from his sincere efforts. It was his innate self-assurance that made him generous with everyone round. Such persons are not just individuals. They are institutions themselves. They are givers and supporters who never overshadow those under their care.

It is moment of reckoning when the students carry your mantel ahead. And that happened when his assiduous disciple K. R. Shyam Sundar brought out three solid edited volumes relating to contemporary issues in the field of labour, in his honour. Shyam has become the most sought after researcher and has arrived at stature where he readily answers FAQs in the media, and has entered the realm of policy advocacy.

Sir had seen a few important threads for further research in my Ph.D. dissertation, and had expressed his desire that I pursued those. It remains my regret that I could not devote the kind of undivided attention such work needed, due to constraints on my personal time. I hope I do my best to work on those areas, without seeking an escape through caveats such as rebirth! That alone would be a befitting tribute to his noble soul!





# Prof. Lalit K Deshpande: 1933–2020: A Towering Academic and A Good Person!

***K. R. Shyam Sundar***

Xavier School of Management,  
Jamshedpur  
krshyams@gmail.com



I cherish perhaps among few others long and close association with Prof. Lalit Deshpande (I shall call him as LK) spanning around three decades. I had the honour of editing three books in his honour (Shyam Sundar 2018, 2019,a, 2019,b). I take immense pleasure and even pride in writing this tribute of LK.

What strikes me as particularly significant is the collaborative research that LK and Dr Sudha Deshpande (the Deshpandes) carried out in the fields of Labour Economics, Industrial Relations, Urbanization, etc. I am tempted to recall the “Partnership” between the Webbs, Beatrice and Sydney who were engaged in almost all the academic areas that

the Deshpandes were! Sudha Deshpande’s role in and contribution to LK’s life is inestimable.

### **Academic Contributions**

The competitive labour market (CLM) theory has been the dominant orthodoxy all along and it has taken new ‘avatars’ (versions/ manifestations/embodiments) over the years. Empirical works have challenged the dominant paradigms of CLM and led to alternative theories. Segmented labour market (SLM) an umbrella term for diverse theories was one of them. LK’s study on Bombay Labour Market (1972-76) based on a massive sample of 6,000 workers belonging to the organized, the unorganized

and casual workforce brought out the segmented nature of the labour market in Bombay and showed that segmentation originated from the original source of labour supply. It was a pioneering study and is still regarded as a landmark study.

His studies in collaboration with other academics on “Labour Flexibility” (Deshpande et al 1998; 2004) like his earlier Bombay Labour Market study are pioneering. In a fundamental sense, these studies also challenge the CLM paradigm by bringing out segmented nature of labour market on the one hand and the role of labour institutions in the labour market and in the large Society. The basic conclusion of the two studies is that labour institutions have not restricted the freedom of employers in their employment decisions despite the existence of the so-called restrictive regulatory framework governing the industrial relations system.

It is a matter of inexplicable tragedy that the respective global agencies did not publish his studies on Bombay Labour Market (funded by the World Bank) and Bombay Labour Flexibility (funded by ILO). Thankfully,

Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics published the former in 1983 (Deshpande 1983) and the latter due to the intervention of Guy Standing and the initiative of Prof. Alakh Sharma by a Delhi-based publisher in 1998 (Deshpande et al. 1998).

I must dwell a little on his intellectual and other belief systems. He had what I call a ‘Bloomsburian’ outlook and pursuit, i.e. to be open to a wide range of perspectives and allow the data to speak for itself. He accommodated all kinds of perspectives and schools of thought, as each has its uniqueness and contribute to our collective understanding. But it important to be wary of the downsides of each of the perspectives. While he greatly admired Bagaram Tulpule, a tall union leader belonging to Hind Mazdoor Sabha among others, he once wondered what would the Webbs (who wrote the history of trade unions in Great Britain and on industrial democracy among others and who held high standards in judging people in public life) think of the current (1990s) trade union leaders in India! He was aware of the fall in the standards of leaders

and critical of various aspects of the working-class movement in India. But his sympathies were clearly on the side of workers and those living on and beyond the margins of the Society and he considered trade unions as “Swords of Justice”.

To me, the most distinctive contribution of LK is his argument that labour institutions perform positive social and economic functions. They discourage the employment of flexi-labour in firms where they are present in a definite sense and elsewhere too through their struggles for decent work and adopt redistributive institutional practices. He recognized at once the Market and State Failures. For example, he criticized the functioning of the command economy – he would often cite the complete lack of choice for consumers and the high rent-seeking behaviour generated by the License-Raj and the near-monopoly enjoyed by many firms. I distinctly remember an incidence in which he refused to pay “gratis” to the telephone linesman who looked eagerly for it even during the liberalized times! He argued that reckless determination of minimum wages will jeopardize micro and

small industries. At the same he was quite concerned by the aggressive labour market strategies used by the industries to deprive workers of their labour even human rights. He recognized the inevitability of unequal distribution of income and wealth in a capitalistic economy. At the same time, he argued that the Soviet-style economy collapsed under its own weight of “inherent rigidities”. While he appreciated Chinese growth like many he was aware of its acute shortcomings. So he did not veer towards either extremes, viz. neo-classical or Marxist and treaded the “Middle Path”. Hence he would prescribe a Golden Balance between the two institutions as he does not see either on its own delivering social and economic progress. He envisaged a greater and stronger role for ILO in steering the World of Work to achieve at once Efficiency and Equity, which is the crux of ILO’s Decent Work Program.

### **LK and Mumbai**

LK and Sudha Deshpande undertook several studies concerning Maharashtra in general and Mumbai in particular. The Deshpandes’

research inputs formed the basis for Brihan Mumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) to make its submissions to the Finance Commission in the early-1990s. The Deshpandes also conducted a massive study for ILO, "Problems of Urbanization and Growth of Large Cities in Developing Countries: A Case Study of Bombay" during 1989-1991. The BMC honoured him with a Medal for his contribution to the development of Mumbai. Noting their significant contributions on urban development issues concerning Mumbai, Centre for Urban Studies at Amsterdam University invited them as visiting scholars to Amsterdam to make a comparative assessment of the two cities. Their report was curiously titled as "Amsterdam through the Gateway of India"!

### **A Kind and Generous Person**

His life was a celebration of a profound sense of humanism, a warm sense of serenity and abiding respect for diversity. In one of his explorations in Bombay (now Mumbai), he interacted with the police personnel, took photographs with them and thoughtfully sent them copies of them featuring them,

a courtesy they were unused to. Needless to say, the police officials were greatly touched by this gesture.

He was magnanimous as the following two instances would bear out. Mark Holmstrom acknowledged in his Book, *Industry and Inequality: The Social Anthropology of Indian Labour* (1985): "My closest collaborator, and the one to whom I owe most of all, Lalit Deshpande...He showed me what to look for in my own fieldwork, criticized and discussed my ideas, and most generously allowed me not only to draw on his Bombay labour market study....but also to make my own tables, using the filled-in questionnaires for that study. This book, and especially the chapter on labour markets, could not have been written without him." (emphasis added) On another occasion, LK urged Prof. Dilip Nachane to apply for the post of Professor in the Department of Economics even as LK had applied for Professorship around the same time! Generosity can only flow only from security and goodness.

He was a profoundly moral and a kind person. He abhorred narrow outlooks and dogmatism. I know that he and

Sudha Deshpande were critical of any form ideology (regional/linguistic/religious/ideological) that denies even challenges personal freedoms. I sensed in him a Lincolnian philosophy of religion and character. He was a giant in the field of Labour Economics but had the rare virtue of being innocent of his stature and he to my best of knowledge did not abuse it, nor he chased positions, money, wealth, fame, etc. We can easily detect broader connections between his world-views and his perception of the labour market and the economy. In a fundamental sense, Pluralism, Justice, Freedom, and Excellence (Efficiency) pervade his entire academic and belief systems.

### **My Association With LK**

His contribution to my academic development is immense. I worked for my PhD under his supervision, but my association continued even after my PhD tenure. LK has been a “father figure” in my intellectual life – I borrow the term from the title of an autobiographical work by Kingsley Martin, ex-editor of *New Statesman*. During the years when turmoil, frustrations, humiliations,

and all other complementary (even complimentary, to wit!) adverse aspects crowded my intellectual, spiritual and even personal life, he was a huge support to me. I am sure I could not have swum through the marshland of adversities and accomplished some decent academic work without his love for me. He stood by me during bad times in my academic and professional life and reposed trust in my research abilities. On January 14, 1998, he gifted me his book *Labour Flexibility in a Third World Metropolis* with an inscription: “With great expectations of real outstanding work from you in the future” – as typical of them, signed as Sudha & Lalit! This inspired me in my academic pursuits. He always urged me to “continue writing research papers”. I am happy that I wrote and evolved as he desired. His support and kindness to me are inestimable.

I must relate here a couple of personal instances of him lest this tribute will be incomplete. LK was a passionate foodie and we were partners in quest though I could not match his variety for I am a vegetarian (by practice and not by conviction) and could not eat street side food

due to my chronic gastronomic disabilities. The ISLE conferences provide not only food for thought but also access to diverse food – in fact, we always discussed both papers presented and the food! He enjoyed with child-like delight street food (the oil-dripping “vazhakai (raw banana) and “milagai (chilli) bhajias” (in Trichy)) and that served in high-end restaurants. My wife, Dr. Rama Kiran loved often sending boxes containing south Indian delicacies like Bisi Bela Bath, Rasam Vada, Idlis drenched in Small-Onion Sambar, etc.) when I visited him. These are probably a few but concrete occasions wherein he must have affected the unfair distribution of them with a rent-seeking behaviour to get a larger share of them! Many spoke of a “glint” in his eyes in their reminiscences and the same appeared when he saw and ate good food and listened to a good seminar presentation! By the way I must mention that he was unsparing in critiquing academic papers though packaged often in his characteristic wry wit! He was almost ready to slip into a chuckle if not a laughter which sometimes would take time to subside!

I must say he was inclined to treat Tamilians favourably. He loved TAMILIAN food, Carnatic music [violin by Lalgudi Jayaraman (LJ)] and C. Rajagopalachari (fondly known as Rajaji). In fact, he like many thought that the Indian economy would have taken a different course, for the better if Rajaji became the Prime Minister instead of Jawaharlal Nehru (some would substitute Sardar Patel for Rajaji, I am sure)!

I must relate a couple of personal instances here. I must have spent indeed the highest number of person-days (in place of the sexist term, ‘man-days’) with LK during the three decades – to be sure, quality times. We discussed not only issues concerning labour but also a variety of subjects like literature, political science, labour history (his favourite), even films and heroines. Indeed, we once debated on the ethicality of “curated beauty” (Sri Devi, his favourite) vis-à-vis “natural beauty” (e.g. Jayapradha, my favourite). He argued that there was nothing unethical in Sridevi using technological aid even to alter the physical dimensions of parts of the body. I submitted that the artificially enhanced beauty is different from

“artistically enhanced beauty” of Jayapradha and technological aids remove the “level playing field” for judging “aesthetic aspects”. His stance shows his perspective that other things being equal the Society should modernize – well, this offers potential discussion on “New Technology and the World of Work”!

He and his family members have helped me a great deal to me. He provided financial support on a few occasions during my PhD tenure and generously paid me for my work relating to the Labour Flexibility Project despite, to wit, my weak protestations(!). Sudha Deshpande has been kind to me in many ways. His son, Dr. Ashish Deshpande and his daughter-in-law and Ashish’s wife, Dr. Aparna Deshpande often kindly extended invaluable medical assistance to me – readers will appreciate their kindness if only they know that I excelled in suffering from various ailments and almost on a continuous basis!

I must relate an incident to demonstrate LK’s generosity. During the late 1980s, when he learnt from me that my mother badly desired my presence with our family for some

emotional reasons for Diwali just a couple of days before its incidence, he immediately gave me a aid of ₹20,000 to fly (as train reservations by then were full) saying that mother’s desire must be honoured unflinchingly! It’s another story that I could not get a seat in the limited flights run by Indian Airlines and returned the amount. I am eternally grateful to their entire family for their collective concern for my health, their love and affection for me and their unstinting support and generous appreciation. I must be having some credit score in my Karmic balance sheet to have known LK and his loving family.

LK was gracious to write a preface to one of my books which comprised my-already-published research articles. I must mention here that one of his major works proved to be a foundation of lasting good innings in my life. I published two articles in the Economic and Political Weekly, which concerned his works on Labour Flexibility (Shyam Sundar 2004, 2005). The latter perhaps remains a most cited article of mine and significantly aided my progress in my career. I am happy I edited three books in his honour, a humble gesture to a Great Teacher. He

graced my book launch programs (in 2018, 2019) by his presence. I must record here that he displayed his characteristic grit and admirable stamina by staying throughout the programme, especially the latter, despite his illness. His kind gesture touched us. I am privileged to have met with him and been close to him in my otherwise uneventful life.

To be sure, it's possible even probable that we have not seen the last of the writings of the Deshpandes in Economics as his grandson Arnav Deshpande (currently pursuing his PG in the Delhi School of Economics) who as Prof. Nachane observes has been "badly struck and struck badly" by the Economics Virus, a Benevolent One indeed (unlike the current Virus shaking the Earth)! I have already mentioned of his younger son, Ashish. I must mention here that his elder son, Prof. Abhay Deshpande is a distinguished Physicist and enjoys global reputation and has won accolades for his high-quality research work. Ashish has been decorated with awards for his Social Work and Aparna for her excellent medical work. It is rare if not improbable that a family comprises a galaxy of high performing and

good individuals. LK is truly a Blessed Soul to have had such a family!

I end this Tribute with a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson in his Essay, Uses of Great Men: "The World is upheld by the veracity of good men: they make the earth wholesome. Those who lived with them found life glad...". How eminently this describes LK and his Life!

### References:

Deshpande, L.K. (1983), Segmentation of Labour Market: A Case Study of Bombay. Kunda Datar Lectures, 1983. Pune: Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics. Bombay: Orient Longman Limited

Deshpande Sudha, Guy Standing and Lalit Deshpande. (1998), Labour Flexibility in a Third World Metropolis, New Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers for Indian Society of Labour Economics.

Deshpande, L.K. and Sudha Deshpande. (1998), "Impact of Liberalization on Labour Market in India: What Do Facts from NSSO's 50th Round Show?", Economic and Political Weekly, May 30: L31-L39.

Deshpande, L.K., Alakh N. Sharma, Anup Karan, Sandip Sarkar (2004), Liberalization and Labour: Labour Flexibility in Indian Manufacturing. New Delhi: Institute for Human Development.

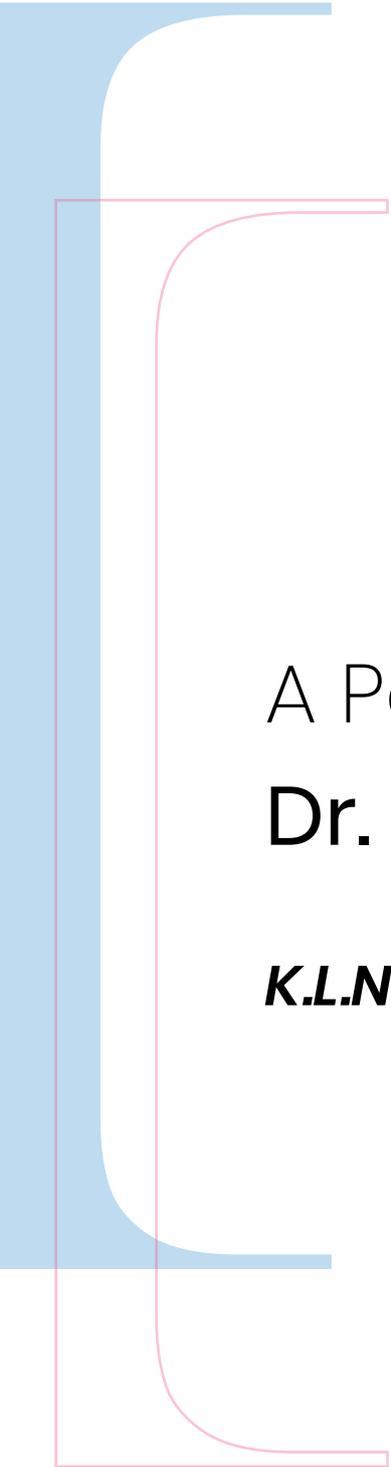
Shyam Sundar, K.R. (2005), "Labour Flexibility Debate in India: A Comprehensive Review and Some Suggestions", Economic and Political Weekly, May, 28-June 4-10, pp.2274-85.

Shyam Sundar, K.R. (ed.) (2018), Contemporary Reforms of Labour Market and Industrial Relations System in India: Ease of Doing Business Versus Labour Rights: In Honour of Prof. Lalit Deshpande, New Delhi, Academic Foundation.

Shyam Sundar, K.R. (ed.) (2019,a), Perspectives on Neoliberalism, Labour and Globalization in India: Essays in Honour of Lalit K. Deshpande, Palgrave Macmillan.

Shyam Sundar, K.R. (2019,b), Globalization, Labour Market Institutions, Processes and Policies in India: Essays in Honour of Lalit K. Deshpande, Palgrave Macmillan.

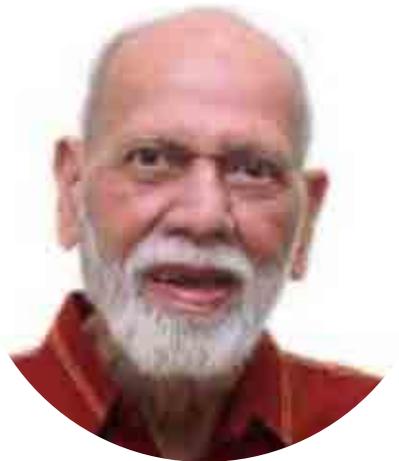




# A Personal Note on Dr. L.K. Deshpande

***K.L.N. Sastry***

HOD, Business Economics, Chetana's H.S. College,  
Mumbai  
sastrykln1962@gmail.com



This is in the first place, a purely personal note on one of my greatest teachers. It is more an attempt to share with others what I gained at the feet of Dr. L.K. Deshpande. On the very first day of my M.A. Part I, a tall, bearded gentleman with a yogic smile on his radiant face and an understanding, mischievous glint in his eyes was explaining the intricacies of 'the Say's Law'. In those days I was a 'strong Keynesian'. I started to confront this smiling giant (at least physically, as I thought at that time), much to the shock of my many classmates. He very patiently heard all my arguments, then peered into my eyes, with a smile, as was his habit. He observed, 'then I shall be your first target'. In my own impertinent style, I retorted, "No, it is

Dr. Brahmanada"! He made me read Rostow, Lewis and most importantly Vakil and Brahmanada. The result is some of my contemporaries fondly call me 'Junior Brahmanada'. He always took interest in what I was doing, though, I could not spend much time with him after his retirement. He is one of those silent creators and the void shall never be filled.