

SPOTLIGHT

a beautiful mind

From idolising Amartya Sen to sharing office space with him, economist **Gita Gopinath** has come a long way. AARTI VIRANI traces her journey from Mysore to Harvard

On a brisk Saturday in December, Harvard University stirs awake. Scant clusters of students shuffle through the legendary Quad, while the occasional camera-wielding tourist pauses, entranced by the brick and ivy. Such is the view from the office of Professor Gita Gopinath, who is far from sleepy this morning. Perched behind her desk, the striking economist finds peace here on the second floor of the Littauer Center, a stately columned building bordering the campus' north end. "I'm very good at shutting everything else out," admits Gopinath, "and I'm a complete workaholic." A board crammed with a sea of serpentine equations only bolsters her claim. "Oh, that's just something I was working on yesterday," she mentions, when she notices me gawking. "I didn't mean to scare you."

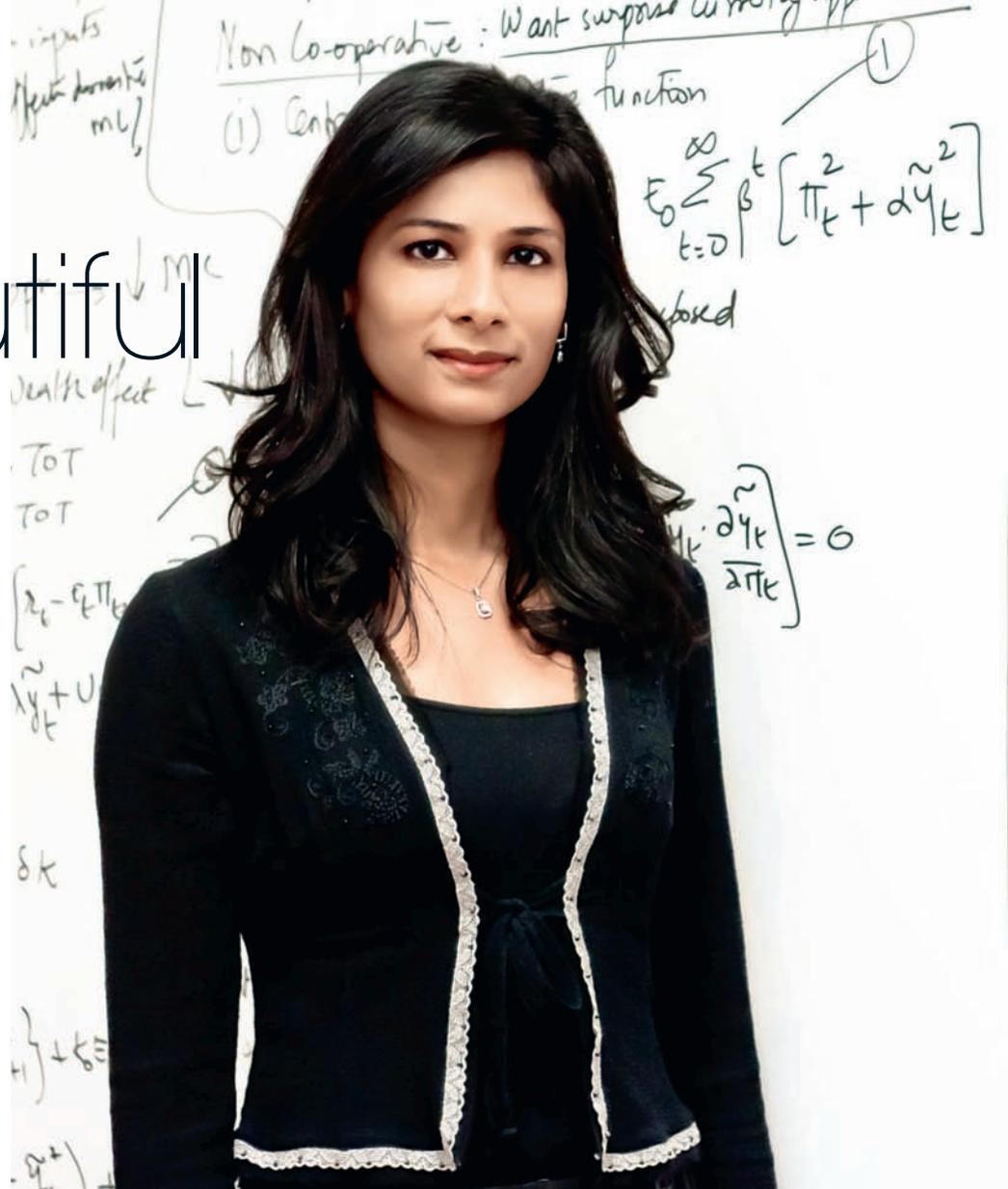
At 39, this intellectual powerhouse was granted tenure at Harvard's renowned economics department, making her the first Indian woman—and the fourth female in the department's history—to claim the coveted position. (Tenure is a highly coveted prize amongst American university academia because it provides professors the guarantee of lifetime appointment, and therefore the freedom to speak and write about anything without fear of dismissal.) Specialising in international macroeconomics and finance, her fields of expertise are regularly thrust

onto the global stage. She's just returned from the World Economic Forum's India Summit, where she gave several lectures on topics including the current government deficit, in the company of luminaries like Union Minister Kamal Nath and Sunil Mittal, chairman and CEO of Bharti Enterprises.

Some of Gopinath's more challenging research, centred on exchange rates, included sifting through an array of confidential data from the American Bureau of Labour Statistics. So imagine my surprise when she admits an unexpected flaw mere minutes into our conversation. "I'm terrible at any kind of organisation or paperwork management," she confesses with a self-deprecating chuckle as she recounts the bureaucratic gauntlet she faced as an undergraduate, after winning the President's Gold Medal at the University of Delhi's Lady Shri Ram College for Women. "They kept sending me to government offices to fix some sort of ad-

ministrative glitch and I would get screamed at because I never brought five copies of something or the other." It's a refreshing admission from one of the brightest minds in America, revealing that Gopinath is free of the intimidating exterior one might associate with such a prestigious position.

Gopinath defies a plethora of stereotypes, most apparent when one surveys the roster of roughly 50 faces that make up the Harvard economics department. She is one of three tenured women who stare back at the viewer and her resolute eyes offer a steady gaze. "It's a very, very small number," she asserts, referring to her female counterparts in the field. "But I never really had any direct sense of discrimination. I think the academic environment is actually great because everyone is pushing the frontier of knowledge and nobody's trying to keep people out deliberately," she insists. "But you know what they say. [In my field] when 10 men



PHOTOGRAPH: CARA TOWNSEND (MAIN); STYLING, HAIR AND MAKE-UP: DAPHNE POWERS

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where you're considered very valuable, you don't have self-doubt and you feel very worthy as a person." She's especially grateful to her father, a small-scale entrepreneur who always nurtured her passion for school. "He's a big believer," she reveals. "Someone who feels like you can really do it, makes you want to do it—there's positive reinforcement right there." She says it with such bold conviction that I'm certain it's a tried and tested economic theory.

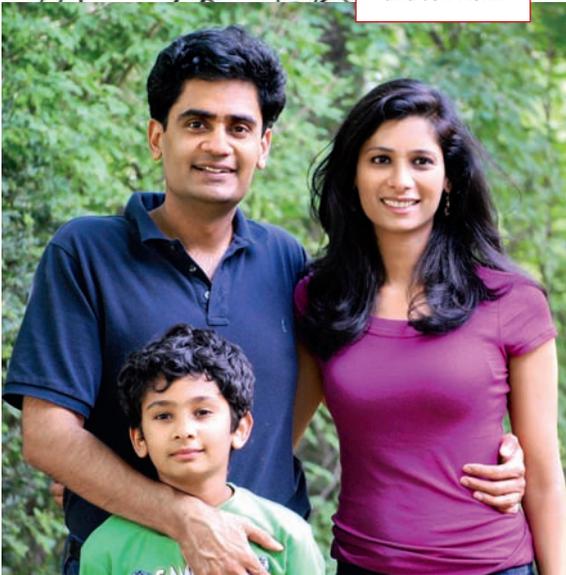
Her mother, whom Gopinath characterises as "Gandhian," runs The Play House, a successful pre-school in Mysore. "If my mother were to live her life all over again, she'd be a complete social worker. Every single kid who walks into her school becomes the most important person in her life," Gopinath claims. A framed black-and-white portrait of the two sits on a nearby bookshelf, and their wide, vibrant grins brighten up the office. "Growing up, there were people who were always disappointed that I wasn't the type of person who helped out in the kitchen," she divulges. "But it was fine for me to be the person I wanted

canny story of the first time she mentioned Iqbal to her father, over a family dinner in 1996. Moments later, they flipped on the TV to see that the Indian Administrative Service exam results were being announced. "And there was Iqbal's picture, on the evening news," says Gopinath, her voice trembling slightly. "He stood first. In the entire country."

The two met as graduate students at the Delhi School of Economics on the notoriously crowded University Special bus. "[Iqbal] still jokes that the only reason I spoke to him was because he saved me a seat on the thing," Gopinath says. They've come a long way from that first commute, and now reside in Lexington (a town just minutes from the Harvard campus) with their seven-year-old son, Rohil. He's graced with an adorable mass of curls and his mother's thoughtful brown eyes, already displaying surefire signs of an ardent economist-in-waiting. "He asked my husband what a fiscal deficit was the other day," she shares, somewhat amused. "He's certainly being exposed a little too much to this stuff."

Then again, Gopinath is all for being a role model—it's partly the reason she

BRIGHT MINDS
Gita Gopinath with her husband Iqbal and son Rohil



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She wonders aloud whether her Keralite background—both her parents hail from the southern state, though she spent formative years in Mysore—is responsible for her inner calm. "In Kerala, we have a matriarchal society," she says. "When you grow up in an environment

through' and he said, 'Whose tenure?'" she recalls. "I was so worried about things going wrong that I didn't want to jinx myself. It's all very secretive, this business." But it's Iqbal, currently the global head of policy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Poverty Action Lab, that she looks to for unfaltering support. "I'm married to a wonderful person," she declares. She shares the seemingly un-

agreed to this interview. "To be honest, I get a lot more requests than I say yes to," she admits. "Of course, my father would love for me to be on the news every night. But my main reason for doing this sort of thing is the hope that there might be five people out there who pick up the magazine and think maybe [what I'm doing] is something they could accomplish." Miraculously, her school-day role models now share a hallway with her. Just steps away, for example, as indicated by the name that's casually scrawled on a makeshift name plate, sits Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen. "These are the people I read in India," she acknowledges. "And now they're my colleagues." At moments like these, Gopinath seems as though she's only begun to digest the place she will claim in academic history. "It's remarkable," she muses. "Just quite remarkable." ■