



Dr Bela Bhatia

Interviewer: Shilpi Gulati

Camera/Sound: Divya Cowasji

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Bela Bhatia is an independent researcher and writer, presently honorary professor at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. Her research interests include questions related to peoples' movements, human rights, peace and democracy, with special reference to rural India. Her doctoral research was on the Naxalite movement in Bihar (Cambridge University, 2000). She has since studied the movement in other Indian states including Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh.

Before turning to academics she had worked for nearly a decade as a full-time activist in a local organisation of agricultural labourers and marginal farmers in north Gujarat and in an international peace movement in Iraq and Palestine, out of which engagement emerged two books: Unheard Voices: Iraqi Women on War and Sanctions (co-authored; London: Change, 1992) and War and Peace in the Gulf: Testimonies of the Gulf Peace Team (co-edited; London: Spokesman, 2001).



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Bela Bhatia:

I was in the 83 - 85 batch, and my specialization was family and child welfare.

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Shilpi:

So how did you come to TISS?

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Bela Bhatia:

Before I came here my family used to live in Baroda. My B.A involved the study of child psychology. And in terms of M.A I was thinking of what to do? Then I thought of Social Work, and then I learnt that Tata Institute was one of the best in the country, no the best in the country. And basically that is what brought me here.

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Shilpi:

What was the process of coming down here for the first time like?

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Bela Bhatia:



That was the first time I had travelled ever out of the place where my family was, where we all lived together. So in some ways it was my first venturing out. In some ways my own journey begins here.

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Bela Bhatia:

Because that was the first time, even my father accompanied me. We came together and that was the last time because after that one has been going everywhere on one's own. But I still remember small things from getting a train ticket was done by me.

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Bela Bhatia:

I was in a competitive environment and that time as students we had to go through competitions and things like that. And one was aware that there were things like group discussions and interviews and so on. So there was a bit of preparation of that kind. But it was a very unusual experience for me. There were all these people from different parts of the country and we were going from one step to another. Because there were many different exercises, that we had to go through I cannot remember the topics now but different topics were involved as far as the group discussions were concerned. And then the interview and so on. So it was a very different experience for me.

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Shilpi:

Any particular memory.. about someone you met, teachers who interviewed you in the panel?

Bela Bhatia:



The campus looked very beautiful and attractive., as it looks like now more or less. I remember that time, what I mentioned earlier, suddenly one was in a kind of situation, because that time we were put up in a hostel, so in the hostel scene or in the the discussions that were happening we were with people from different parts. There was this kind of uncertainty. . And in such kind of uncertainty you are just venturing out and you are a bit uncertain yourself as to what to do and what you want to do in life. And this was one of the options what each one was entertaining. So it was not that everyone came with a very definite kind of mind set , that this is what we want to do. . There were a a lot of those kinds of deliberations amongst us.

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Shilpi: Can you share bits of your hostel life, where you did some kind of mischief or something?

Bela Bhatia:

Some things do stay clear but also with the passing of time it's true that some things also dim. What I do recall is the fact that one was a hostelite. I think that was a very important part of the experience. Because there was a lot that we learnt there. One learns from what happens in the classrooms but one also learns a lot from what happens outside the class room situation and we had a very good batch. Some of us are still in touch with each other.

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Bela Bhatia:

That time there was a group called Shodhana. It had been made by some of our seniors and the whole idea of Shodhana was to discuss some contemporary issues. So there were very frequently some speakers who were engaged directly in some work, somewhere . But these things are very common today like the campus is very alive now. And there is lot of activity of that kind. But, in our time that was not the case.



We were only 64 in our batch. Likewise there was Personal Management stream which was much smaller. So all together we were less than 100 students and the faculty. In that way it was closely knit thing.

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Bela Bhatia:

And to us that thing looked quite big. Shodhana is something that I do recall. And otherwise there were people from the North East. Quite distinctly I remember Sandra and there were some friends from Kenya like Dolly, Dorothy. Now Dolly was my roommate. Then again another roommate Pari she was from Shillong. Then there was Julie from Calcutta, so again living together. . We were 4 in a room. I was in room no 1 in girl's hostel.

That interaction of being together goes a very long way in terms of how you learn. It was like stepping out of my own confined environment. So that goes a long way.

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Shilpi:

How were students guided in terms of lectures and classes? Any one professor you particularly liked or you still remember the teachings.

Bela Bhatia:

There are several of them whom I remember quite clearly, like for example Mrs. Patkar she was our HOD. Madam Gokarn was there and Mr. Parasuraman. I remember him other wise also but because he was teaching us tribal anthropology and that was the first direct exposure to the tribal world.

Later on, as a part of my dissertation I chose to study the health care utilization of the tribals of Daang district. And in that way it was my first direct exposure to village India. And that has been very formative for me. Because In the following two decades, I have spent a lot of my time in direct activism and research in tribal areas of the country. That is something that I look back at



and I think that one does not really remember that much of what goes on in the class. And so much emphasis is put on that. Some assignment I may recall like we had to do an assignment on the plight of the old. So basically what I do recall are assignments, engagements where there is a direct participation. I think those are the ones which stay with you and which you remember. My assignment was on the plight of the old and it was interesting for me. (We were allowed to choose our own topic)

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Bela Bhatia:

Most of my memories are related of that nature. . Classroom experience is also important as one learns to express etc., in a group situation. I think this is important. The fact that I was in Bombay was an important part of my learning here. Some of the first things I did like the first ever attending of a rally was in Bombay. There was a woman in Chembur who had committed suicide and the womens' groups in Bombay were saying that this was not suicide and it was murder and she was pushed into a situation where she committed suicide. So there was a rally where we went through the streets of Chembur and we also remember standing just near the person's house and so on and we remember shouting slogans. And that experience of shouting slogans in a group where everyone is doing something together is something very different.

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Bela Bhatia:

And the experience of doing something together is something that has stayed with me. . And also, being in a big city because again there were various things happening in Bombay. Like there was CED, Center for Education and Documentation. That used to be kind of an adda of activists in Bombay. So there was CPDR and even there was Lok Shahi Hakk Sanghtna, Forum was also very active. So there was a lot happening in Bombay that time. Sometimes many of us had a chance to participate in those events. And it made for a certain kind of impression. .



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Shilpi:

Something about your field work experience.

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Bela Bhatia:

We used to go twice a week for field work, from the very first year I remember. We were expected to wear Saris. So that whole initiation into it. It was about the Social Worker going into the community. . That time, it was interesting that going into the community was thought to be fit for the students of Community Development, CODP . Those students were allowed and expected to go to the community but not others.

You choose your specialization when you are trying to get admitted into the institution. So you are often end up choosing what you have a good chance of getting into. . In my case because I had child psychology and which I was fairly interested in, I thought that family and child welfare will be something I can do further.

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Bela Bhatia:

From that prospectus it was not clear why they would not admit me in URCD, Urban and Rural Community Development. But otherwise my inclination was towards some kind of work with the community.

I was the first student in Family and Child Welfare who was allowed to go for our field work to Cheetah Camp. So that was a kind of first step that even a Family and Child Welfare student may wish to and can work in a community setting.



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Bela Bhatia:

Each student was supposed to do different things and one of the things that I was engaged in was work in Cheetah Camp. And that was very important. Cheetah Camp is not very far from here and it exposes you to the slum condition and exposes you to the communities which live there. Lot of the lower class Muslims live in Cheetah Camp from that time. That was also the time when the Bhiwandi riots had happened. So there was a fall out for that and we could see that. So there was a lot discussion about communalism in that context.

A group of us had also gone to Bhiwandi. What I don't remember is that whether it was part of the TISS exercises or I had gone with others in Bombay. That I cannot really remember.

Other than that I was exposed to Children in an Orphanage so I spent few months there. And then in another setting where children had special needs so I remember we were supposed to do a case study. I had done a case study on two children who had cerebral palsy. Now both these exposures were important for me. For example my time in orphanages showed me what life in institution settings can be like. As a student I was supposed to spend lot of time with some of them. So I remember the story of this boy, how he ran away from a village in Maharashtra and how he came to Bombay and then how he finally found his way into this orphanage. In the orphanage some basic services were being provided and I think the effort was there to do some good. Like for example one went inside the kitchen to see how the administration of cooking happened in the kitchen. So we were quite shocked to see the degree of hygiene and things like that. This is described well in George Orwell's book 'Down and Out' in London and Paris where he describes what he sees about what happens in the back rooms in a hotel.

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Bela Bhatia:

In old campus there was a home for the mentally disadvantaged people that was even in a worse situation and infact after coming back to Bombay last year as a visiting faculty I was thinking that I wanted to visit these institutions again to see what is the difference.



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Bela Bhatia:

So all these exposures were important. And then besides that, as part of my block placements. So for one month we were placed in institutions of our choice in any part of the country so I chose to be in CINI (Child in Need Institute) in outskirts of Calcutta. In a place called Daulatpur. So that again exposed me to children, to health conditions in the rural scenario. And CINI was doing remarkable work during that time and it is still continuing now. So that was an experience in another part of the country.

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Bela Bhatia:

And the dissertation itself was an important experience and I spent six weeks in Daangs and was alone. So it was the first time when you find your own wings and you are in a setting completely on your own and you have to manage your small research in your own way. Find the people, find the villages and talk to people and basically you on your own and I think that experience with Bhils Konkani in Daangs was important.

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Bela Bhatia:

During those years Bhopal happened. So TISS had played an important role in Bhopal. We were the first group of Researchers who went into Bhopal and we spent lot of time there and we were with Prof Parasuraman.

That was a different kind of engagement in a direct way and using your skills and as students we had a learning experience and TISS got out the first report that time on what had happened. And condition of those who were affected by the whole disaster.



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Shilpi:

What was the strategy used by TISS to respond to the National Disaster? How were you able to draw your class work to the field?

Bela Bhatia:

This also could be called the group work where we were working. Something big had happened. We did not understand very well as we were not exposed to industrial development and the laws around it. But big thing had happened which had caused large distress.

Very large numbers of the population which was poor and disadvantaged were affected. So there was this kind of relationship built. We were placed in different institutions and communities in and around Bombay and at that time we had not done our block placements so when Bhopal happened that time. And being exposed to that kind of a direct situation and doing research which is not your own research but doing it as a collective, so there was a questionnaire that was drafted that time.

We were a large group who went together and then we had divided ourselves into groups and we were going to different place in Bhopal and basically talking to people with a questionnaire. So it was something direct and it was very clear. We did not make too many mistakes and it helped us because otherwise as a student we did not know what questions to ask. Often in these kind of situations you need a reason to go into that family. Something like this gives you a reason to do that. And I remember asking these questions and they explaining what had happened and how in terms of their eyes and in terms of their agony they themselves not realizing what was happening and so on.



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Bela Bhatia:

We went to different neighborhoods and spoke with a cross section of people. So mostly I don't remember going to well-off neighborhoods but mostly it was crowded places we went to and engaged with lower middle class people.

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Shilpi:

Any learnings while you worked with this institution in terms of organization?

Bela Bhatia:

I have not seen the report till today, I mean I would like to see it. So the first learning is that it is very important to do these things and an Institution like ours which has a practical edge to it, I think we're very well placed to do more of these things.

And a lot is happening in our country these days. So for example last year when a group of students went to Jaitapur I think that is good. In that we need to do a lot more of these kind of things. . I think this itself was important learning for me and TISS to get engaged with this work.

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Bela Bhatia:

Well I think the learning here had a very important part to play as it brought me to the edges. Because after I passed out of here the only thing I was clear on was that I wanted to work in a rural area and unfortunately we were not that exposed to the different ideologies that exist or we did not have a systematic understanding to social movements that already occurred though 1980s', was a very important time where many social movements began.



And a lot was happening and there was a greater hope from democracy and we have to even continue with that now. Till that time it was basically the thinking that government is accountable to the people and if we bring enough awareness amongst the people. So their own consciousness about rights would increase. . Therefore we would achieve the goals of democracy. So one didn't know much more than that. So with that idea I was looking out for work, and fortunately I came across two institutions. One was Sethu in Ahmedabad and Medha Patkar had just joined Sethu in Nov 1984 and I had passed out in July 1985, so it so happened both of us were looking out – me for some place to work and Medha for some people.

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Bela Bhatia:

Earlier I was not looking to work in this place in Gujarat because I had the idea that I could do rural a work in Maharashtra. So I was looking in Maharashtra and had visited places like Beed but then I found the Marathi there is very difficult and I may not be able to learn fast enough. Since I had lived in Gujarat then I thought maybe working there would be one option. Medha had written to me so I responded to that and joined Sethu. So that time there were two people besides Medha and so it continues to be a very small organization. And the whole Sethu, which means bridge and the idea was to fill the gap that exists between social knowledge and social action of the other. So thats why it was called Sethu - Center of Social Knowledge and Action.

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Bela Bhatia:

We as activists would be in Sethu but we would be placed full time in another local area. We were outsiders but we would with them we were part of that group. This would be some kind of help and also vision for middle class as an activist in the role that we can play – in trying to further strengthen local groups. So with that in mind I was in Sethu and it was a small organization. I remember I was paid 1200 Rs for five years. So in that way it was a very small organization.



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Bela Bhatia:

It was an NGO registered but also somewhere it was NGO with a difference. The whole attempt was to be in between. As part of that Medha had already started going to Sabarkantha and there was a local group called Shramjeevi Samaj. Initially Medha was going there, so even I joined her. Till that time Sethu was engaged in some direct work in Sabarkantha and two other places.

So within organization it was decided that I would spend more time in Sabarkantha and Medha would be free to do other things. And in terms if my identity also I became an integral part of Shramjeevi Samaj. That is where I continued to be for the next 5 years i.e. 85 - 90. Shramjeevi is the Samaj of trade union of marginal farmers and it has in the union itself adivasis, dalits, people belonging to lower class, OBCs, so Sabarkantha which is bordering Gujarat and Rajasthan on the other side - It is at the end of Gujarat. In OBCs you had Banjaras and Thakrwardas. Shramjeevi Samaj was an interesting experiment in that late 1970s. They had already struggled together for land. This was the land which was to be made available to the impoverished people of the region according to a government resolution...

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Bela Bhatia:

Because there was a dam built there and peoples land was taken and they had been compensated for that. Mostly they were middle level farmers. So the government resolution said that same land of the dam does not get filled every year. Hence the land is empty. So then what should we do with the land? So the government resolution said that this land should be made available every year when it is not full given on yearly contractual basis. It should be made available to the farmers of that area.

What happened was that people did not even know about it. So original owners who had already been compensated also continued to till that land. Then high school teacher Bhanubhai Adhvani came to know about it and he was a socialist. He was the one to spread the word about resolution in that area and people got organized and later fought for the land. So ultimately Shavjini Samaj was formed out of that struggle. So they were able to get 1300 acres of land.



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Bela Bhatia:

It is an exceptional struggle because in Gujarat you don't have many examples of such struggles of that kind. Later they made lot of police repression also which is not seen in Gujarat. We hear such stories from Bihar and Bengal but not from Gujarat. And then their uniqueness was that they made agricultural society cooperatives. I came later but I became a part of it too. And after the last two decades my own research has taken me to so many left organizations but no where have I come across agricultural societies .

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Bela Bhatia:

See otherwise it is a Marxist idea that collective farming and people did these things collectively. All of these things have a lot of theory on this. Of course in lots of communist areas they have taken land. But almost no where else have I come across such kinds of living examples that land was taken, collectively owned and they continued to do kheti on this land on a collective basis. Because the ideology was about their rights. So it is completely different and Gujarat is very weak in Left Movement. Now after 20 - 25 years I realize the importance of Shavjini Samaj. And that had a very important impact that exposed me to the importance of land, to the people and to the caste. Things that I read in classrooms which were now alive to me.

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Bela Bhatia:

When you go to villages and the first question asked is that what is your caste? And then you realize the importance that caste has. And the role it plays in our society. Caste in lands, caste in panchayats and all this in some ways made me realize the importance. Shamjivi Samaj was my second classroom after TISS. The whole time I was in Bhiloda Taluka for 5 years living with the people there and that time I remember we got Gujarati newspapers which made me understand rural society which have gone a long way in my education



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Bela Bhatia:

I think its the exposure that you give to a person but also the individual that what they want to do with their lives. In order to get them attracted to this kind of work in some ways direct exposure is required. I think that really helps. I did not know much about ideologies. Prof Hebsur took a class in Political Science and I was that way introduced to Marxism. But at that stage it was not enough.

One did not really understand all these things clearly. But somewhere when I came out of TISS the only thing clear in my mind was that I wanted work in a rural area. From where did that clarity come? Because that was not there when I joined TISS. Because I had never seen a rural area before. So TISS in that sense helped me to figure out. So if we can continue to do that with our students, to expose them to direct realities one thing is you give a class room lecture, and that also should be done, and even in the classroom, how can we effectively, bring the realities into the classroom and then, , . I am not at all discounting theory because theory has to ultimately come from practice, and that theory one has to go back to practice.

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Bela Bhatia:

At the Same time we have to remember the practical side. Students are too loaded with too many readings and so on. To my mind it is good to expose them to a few things and do that in a deep way and let them see the direct realities by touching their mind and also their hearts. You uncover their emotions. You steer them from whatever stage they are. And make them question things.

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Bela Bhatia:



In 20 years they have lived in that environment which has inculcated certain values of what is right and wrong. A certain assessment of analysis of society. Somewhere I think after they come to Institutions like ours especially when you want to decide what kind of people you want to create.

Somewhere what was not there in our times, but is there now. And in our times we did not have the temptations that a student has to now face. That is we did not have this corporate, we did not have CSR and so on where you can also do some social work and also earn big salaries.

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Bela Bhatia:

You know that kind has to work. Even in our times we had some big NGOs and so on but to some extent temptations were still less as compared to now. Because now, there is a larger pull in the market, the kind of consumerism is there so even the person values the kind of things the person may be using in his daily life. .

For example computers, we did not have computers but now laptops and other things are very common. A youngster may aspire for these things. Again therefore keeping the present in mind. That this is the kind of background they are coming from and also that this is the kind of aspiration that society is setting as something to aspire for, in between we have an organization like TISS. So TISS has to be therefore very clear that what kind of students and people we want to create and what kind of role they can play so what are the kind of gaps that are there are filled up. Today I feel the exposure is tremendous They are exposed to all kinds of things now, I mean movements, people, activists. There's films, documentaries, all kinds of things now, and at the same time the kind of challenges society is now facing are more acute than they were in the mid eighties.

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Bela Bhatia:



As I said in mid 80s we were somewhere with some kind of.. values were also there There was a kind of understanding that if the government is not performing, people have to steer themselves and organize themselves for their rights. And if they do that then they are likely to get it. But now we know that there are deeper aspects to it. To what extent is our democracy itself committed to the preamble of the constitution for example. So there are direct systematic questions involved.

And in terms of movements you have direct onslaughts.. For example, in the tribal world a direct onslaught after the new economic policy, after 1990s you see a very direct onslaught where lands are being taken in favor of the corporates, and progressive laws like PESA (Panchayat Extension to Scheduled areas) are completely side lined.

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Bela Bhatia:

So there you see directly how the state is siding with corporates and companies sending their police to protect them and their interest rather than peoples rights. So the kind of challenges even on the ground now are acute. Now at this time in order to meet that challenge you do need social intervention, but we also need political intervention. But the thing is whether from our institute we are able to fill that kind of need in the society. That we have to think about.

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Shilpi:

For this year of Platinum Jubilee what would be your message to TISS?

Bela Bhatia:

I think my message or hope would be that TISS should be able to make a difference. It should somehow have a very direct role to play. In trying to bring large sections of Indian people who are immersed in their situations of poverty disadvantage and discrimination.



That we should play a direct role in pulling them out of the kind of situation they find themselves in. So institutions like ours and people like us who are somewhere in between the powers to be and the people. So we have to be that kind of a bridge, where through social knowledge and action in some ways we have to effectively build an aim in mind. - that how do we create situations, knowledge bases, create analysis and questioning minds and a value system. Students not only think about them and their family (but they need to) but there is a kind of social interest trying to do something for society.

In our times we had a saying that Social Work is Seva and we said that the Seva aspect is not good and it was a different notion that had to be pushed forward. Today there is too much professionalism and fact is less of Seva, and Seva not in sense of that Seva but also in the political sense in sense of political commitment.

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Bela Bhatia:

So I think TISS could be in between and try to get the direct practice. We are not a part of the grassroot movement but we are in between of the grass root situation and the government, that we are somewhere able to sensitize them and inform them about the realities as well as to strengthen the struggle of the people on the ground. Somewhere we have to play that kind of role.

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Shilpi:

You came back last year after 25 years so what was the reaction when you came back to class?

Bela Bhatia:

I think one tends to, as you walk down, basically look at the present but also the past, so there is a bit of present past kind of a thing going on your mind. In the sense you are also looking at your own self. What you were before and and the journey you have taken till that point in life now and



then there is a bit of introspection which goes on. Also when I look at students and they look so adult to me and somewhere you feel that what I can teach them, they are young adults. And then sometimes I do think that even I must have been like them.

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Bela Bhatia:

On the face of it you are a young adult, but there is so much of it that can go. That way it is very important. That way it is a very important phase of one's life that one spends in this Institute. And stages before you actually step out into the real world/ life. That is again the thing running in my mind. Now there are so many young people and the number is so huge so there is a greater sense of responsibility about what you can do and how do you teach to make some impression on their minds.