



Dr Gokul Mandayam

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Q: We wanted to take a ride back to your earlier days in TISS, when you were here as a student. So can you tell us in which year you were a student here and how did you land up in TISS?

GM: Okay, I have to go 20 years back in my life and I was a student at Tata Institute of Social Sciences between 1990 and 1992. I have my Bachelors in Business and then the dabbled with some accounts career for some time and then always wanted to do something with the social sector, was not sure. Shopped around, did a little bit of research, and you know, applied and got through in 1990.

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My academic courses were in the concentration called medical and psychiatric social work. So, that was my concentration when I graduated.

Q: Sir, how did you take this shift from the world of business and accounts, and then take a drastic step to come to social work?

For one, I do come from a family of people who had dabbled with some sort of loosely defined notion of social work. My grandmother was a community leader. We are from Bangalore basically and she was a well-known community leader in those days and this is a lady who has possibly done her seventh grade but she was very articulate and she was so influential that she was one of the founders of a girls' school in South Bangalore which is existent even today and I



am really proud to be her grandson. That, and I did try with the corporate world in terms of my career and I was not too comfortable going ahead with that and I wanted a change and I guess I was also exploring my life at that point, you know, you are in your twenty something, so early 20-21. So I did try chartered accountancy, you know the standard part, but that was not my cup of tea, I realized.

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So, I landed up in social work, but definitely had a passion for working with people. And again we were naive to what concentrations were at that point of time and things are very different now from what it was before. So, we did, you know, end up in a particular concentration for whatever reason but then, I must say, I must say that my two years of academic experience at TISS has taught me a lot and I have taken on a very well defined career path since then.

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Q: So, when you were here, in the early 1990s, what was the campus like? How did it look? What did the students do? If you could just tell us. GM: Well, the campus was as green as it is today, but we could hear a lot more birds chirping. And I guess the harbor line was only till Vashi then. They were still building Belapur stuff and now to, you go all the way to Panvel, which is interesting. Also, we had TISS bus that I vividly remember. It was a sort of a leafy green bus. And as hostelites, we would enjoy riding the bus uptil Dadar Station. It was just a



little thrill for us. It also got us to interact a lot more with our day scholar class mates and that's one thing I remember very vividly. And then I guess we were a smaller population then, maybe in the early hundreds if my memory is right. So, definitely a much more close knit feeling with the faculty members. I would say we knew faculty members almost one on one and for those of us in the hostel; it was all the more better because we had constant recourse to things on campus. The library was in a building where now the administration is staffed and I remember the librarian and I don't remember his name. A man in spectacles, he was so friendly with us that you know, we would just say, "Mama, hume ye chahiye, wo chahiye" and you know it was very very people oriented. Not that it is not now, but I don't know about what it is now, because I can't comment on that.

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The most interesting part was the hostel life itself and if it is okay with you, I would just like to share some thoughts on that. For one, we would await those parties that would happen in the Dining Hall. The Dining Hall would sort of magically transform to almost a discotheque with lights and then, we would tell all our day scholars, "Just hang on, stay with us tonight in the room and we will have fun." I was also very interested in connecting with the day scholars and so, hostelites and day scholars had a very rich interaction. We would have our share of fun which I guess still happens now but it's in a much larger scenario.



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Of course, the walk to Subbalakshmi for coffee and chai and we didn't have pastry shops like Bliss and all those things that you see now, but Subbalakshmi was the best recourse and, the further place to that was of course Diamond Garden, Chembur which was expensive, was pinching with rickshaws and we were living on very tight budget so to speak. So those are some very interesting moments specifically the parties at the DH and, what else? We were very friendly with the watchmen crowd at the front gate and actually one of the watchpersons was from Karnataka, somewhere near Bangalore and you know, it just required a matter of being skilled with the languages. I loved to learn languages so when it needed, I would speak Marathi, I would speak half-broken Marathi, when it was needed that I speak Gujarati and my knowledge of Gujarati is really bad but I could manage, and Kannada and Tamil, so I could get my work done through, which was absolutely nice. And, in a way, it was a very close-knit community in that sense and of course, there would always be those gup-shups like "Oh! you know, Look at that! There is a little romance going on there!" There were certain parts which were tabooed, "Don't even go there, you might be surprised with some very interesting scenarios", to put it better.

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So, it was actually fun and the best part was I remember in my second year, I had a single room. We drew lots or something in Men's Hotel 2 and my room was the last, pretty close to Raj Kapoor's Bungalow. On my balcony I could just stand out, and of course I never got to see



anybody except one night, New Year's Eve, when everybody would huddle into my room and the room opposite to mine. Everybody would painfully yank their neck out to see if there were stars there. Those were some very interesting moments and fun experiences that we have and I guess this was the first time for me, living in a hostel so it was an absolutely enriching learning experience for me.

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Q: Any tale about the pranks you played with your hostel warden or your teachers...

GM: Very little though, we would tease our hostel warden a lot. And the warden is actually now in Tuljapur though his son is here so it is interesting. We would always make sure that we would not listen to his comments. For instance, he would say, "Eyy, kya itna kachra faika hai?" We would have fun at his expense and say, "Bhagwan tera job hi hai na? Kuch to kaaam karo, sharam karo yaar!" But we would have our moments of fun with him and we learnt at the heart that we have to be nice to them because they had ways of getting back at us. We would have our subtle pranks and you know there were some pockets of the hostel that would play tremendous mischief.

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I remember there was this one incident where one guy secretly brought a bunch of girls into his room, lock them up in his room and it was strict no. It was allowed only on one day of the year, if my memory is right. But this was not that day, and all hell broke loose. then we all sort of supported this guy, "Nahi nahi Bhaiya, ye sab padhai ke liye, wagaire wagaire " and all that stuff. So, we did have some interesting moments like that.

Q: Any Professor you remember from the classroom, somebody who has really affected your way of thinking on social sciences?

GM: Definitely, and I am very proud to say that I was her research student. This is the Dean of the School of Social Work, Professor Surinder Jaswal. She was my research advisor in the second year and I was looking at the topic of Traditional medicine because I was in the concentration called 'Medical and Psychiatric Social Work'. Her expertise is in the area of Health and she has some very interesting background in Health and as a faculty, as a mentor, I have a very high regard for her.

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She also was a very personal, very amenable, very down to earth, and always supportive of all my endeavors. Even to this day, she is my Professor. I just had a very interesting meeting with her. Of course, I am now in a very different role as a Faculty member from a different School in the US but she is one person I have very very high regards for. She has been very supportive of



all my work that I did with her. A very nice mentor, a very nice individual and definitely, I would still like to continue maintaining my academic connections with her. Even on the personal note, she is very empathetic to the typical student circumstances that one goes through and so, I really appreciate all her time and mentorship with me.

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Q: Sir, can you talk a bit more about the relationship that the students and teachers shared and how would a regular day be? Would you have conversations outside the classroom? How was the atmosphere like, in terms of academics?

GM: You know, I would sort of like to go back to the comment that I made earlier that in terms of the number of students, we were comparatively a smaller cohort and I can't speak for all my classmates but personally my experience. I was very selective about who I wanted to communicate with not in a negative way but based on my comfort ability levels. There were some professors whom I could relate to and there were some professors whom I found it difficult to relate. You know it's nothing to do with the professor per se but it's probably also part of my own learning at that point.

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More so when it was field work because for one, field work was with the field supervisor and the first year I was placed with a street children project in Bombay Central, me and another colleague of mine. It took quite a while to even learn the tricks of the trade as to what it means to be dealing with street children. In fact, the children themselves taught a lot more to us and it was really well worth the experience. I did have my field supervisor who was, from a work stand point of view extremely brilliant, very challenging and very demanding and while our learning curve was still sort of in the initial part of it, getting used to the expectations which I guess is by far the standard, in some way would create anxiety with us. That was something that me and my colleague would constantly talk about and we did sort it out at a later point but there was that initial level of uncomfortable-ness, largely because of our learning curve itself. She was a very good mentor, she was tough, she was tough, even writing in field logs and journals we had to do a little of rewrites and I think, as I sort of reflect back on it, it has really helped me.

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Now that I am an instructor, I sort of go back to all that to learn the tricks of how to deal with students cause I am on this side of the continuum. Oh the research class! It's ironic I am saying this because I do teach research. I remember the exam was very palpitation provoking. The previous night the day scholars would stay with us in our room and we would clandestinely smuggle them in, "Chal yaar, ek takia le tu, uspe hi soo ja, ek bed sheet hai, ek chaddar hai... "And girls at girls' room and guys at guys'. We would sit till like 1-2 and I think at that point of time there was some special coffee chai session going on, which I don't know if it's going on



even now. You know, trying to remember all the statistical formulae and how to apply that, and you know if I reflect back on that and see my students now at USA, I think there is a certain similarity - maybe it goes back to that whole learning curve notion. As an instructor I feel, "Oh boy! My instructors should have had a tough time and look at what I am going through!" It definitely is some very interesting reflection that was one tough subject. And also the fact that I was doing a thesis with Dr. Jaswal and it was qualitative research, much more demanding. So, you have to transcribe all your interviews, you have to analyze - so very good applications of the research concepts but it was one hell of a job that we had to go through.

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So that was an interesting experience, very positive outcomes that it resulted in terms of my career towards research, even motivating me for taking up a doctoral program and lo and behold! Now I am a faculty member. So I always owe it big time to my alma mater and to my professors, that source. Another class that I really enjoyed was Social Welfare Administration and I remember the Professor was one Dr. Meena Galiara who apparently is no longer with TISS but I liked the way she would handle the class, the contents of the class and I don't remember the examples vividly but I really liked her approach to the class, making it much more pragmatic. Also, the Community Organization class. For some reason, you know, I am not a psychology background and probably that was a disadvantage in itself because Freudian theories were not the most interesting to me although I had to take it in as part of my reading.



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My time would largely be spent on looking at, we used to call the other concentration URCD, Urban Rural Community Development. Talks with them and I used to wonder, "Oh boy! Am I in the wrong concentration?" or "What did I choose?" You know you are in that confused state of affairs. But I guess it was good in a way because it led me to sort of plan my trajectory also along and even to this day we joke around, Dr. Jaiswal says, "You were in the Health and Mental Health concentration. Look where you are now!" And I tell her, "Dr. Jaiswal, I am within the larger umbrella called social work. So I guess, it all works out in the end."

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Q: If you could talk a little more about how your time in TISS has contributed to your growth as an individual and then as a professional. GM: A lot of what I said earlier in terms of the trials and tribulations with courses, with professors, having been a student in an academic institution and social work, the crème de la crème social work institution in India, and I am really proud to be associated with that. Now, at the teaching end of the continuum, in a university abroad, it always take me back in time when I have, for instance, a student who just comes up to me and says I do not like research. Why are you forcing me to do this?

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I still have to stop and think what I did in my class. I can reminisce. When we have these open conversations with the students, I take them back in time to what I learnt and how my faculty mentored me in TISS, and then how we could approach it. So, I would say that a lot of the learning in the classroom and interaction with the colleagues, I mean student colleagues, specifically you know, being in the hostel was very good. It was not just academically a growth; it was also a growth personally. You know I had never interacted with the people from the North-east at all and we were very good friends. The day scholars, I would spend a lot of time with, you know, Maharashtrian families. They would invite me to Ganapati. It was very interesting to... It helps you grow as an individual and looking at diversity as an aspect.

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We teach that now to students. A lot of personal growth, a lot of academic growth, and I would say even my interest in research was spearheaded by my experience with Prof. Jaiswal and my research Professors. I did have a career in research for a couple of years before I went into the doctoral programme some of which, not necessarily in social sector research, but broader social research in a corporate arena. But research is research anyways and I was working for a qualitative research firm so it gave me good insights. And I would again say that my rooting in Tata Institute of Social Sciences in my Masters programme has quite been instrumental in my trajectory and that the reason why I would like to come back to my alma mater now in a different capacity although. My hope is to show case efforts in the social work arena that happens in this side of the world to my colleagues and my students in the other side of the world.



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Also, through the global program, expose the students to what it means to be studying in very premium institution for social work in India and the whole world of development practice. Again, as I said, I have gravitated towards the macro arena but the exploration of my research and interest has tremendously been the result of all my academic experiences in TISS and I am thankful for all that for where I am today.

Q: can you tell us a little bit about your work, at the University of Southern California?GM: Absolutely. I have been teaching at the University of Southern California for the last 6 years. I had joined as an Assistant Professor, just got promoted to Associate Professor last year. Broadly speaking, within our school, we have two streams of faculty members: people who are in the research side and people who are in the teaching side. It's a continuum, people who are heavy duty on research do very little sometimes no teaching at all; to people who are in the teaching heavy side of the continuum who do a lot of teaching, a lot of curriculum building, a lot of these global emersion programs, and very student centered work activities and some amount of research, because combining research and teaching is a very interestingly heavy load of academic responsibilities.

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I am in the teaching end of the school and I have a really tremendously academically efficient and very well educated and scholarly set of colleagues from different topical arenas. So, I have people who are experts in psychology, to people who are experts in economics, to people who are experts in business management. So I have the fortune of working with them -I have worked with them in research projects, pretty much in the macro arena. My area of interest is looking at empowerment and livelihood. I am moving to an area of social enterprise, that's exactly what the focus of the global programme is because it also gives me an opportunity to combine my business interest with the social arena.

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I must say as part of my doctoral education programme I was fortunate enough to have an internship at the Arizona State Senate. I went to school at Arizona State University. So I was the only, if I may call it, 'firangi' intern in that side of the world and a doctoral student. It was a very interesting experience for one semester to be working in the equivalent of the State Assembly. I mean if you are an intern at the Maharashtra State Legislature, it's almost that. It gave me a very interesting perspective on policy and policy practice is another area of interest that I teach. I also coordinate advocacy from students for Lobby days in Sacramento, which is the capital of the State of California.

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So very varied activities. I have also been recently appointed by the University Of California School Of Social Work to be the School's representative for Special Analysis, which is really looking at mapping and geographic information systems. How do you really assess the needs of the communities in a special context? How do you plan for evaluating the outcome of programmes in a special context? Again, as I said, it is very macro because my interests are in the area of programme evaluation and those sorts of things. GIS is getting to be a lot more specific in terms of my interest, and I have had some interesting brief projects with social service agencies requesting me to help them with mapping techniques, and I have integrated that as part of my course curriculum. I have even created a course called 'Mapping 101 for Social Workers', sort of like the rudimentary skills required. So I think, thanks for the support from the School of Social Work at USC and thanks to my inputs here, I have come a long way in terms of getting to be a faculty in the academic social work world. So, that's where I am.

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Q: What I wanted to ask you was that you have been exposed to social work education, both as a student and as a faculty in a developing country and a developed country. If you could tell us the difference. And Indian Social work is influenced largely, it began largely with American missionaries who came and started Social Work here. I wanted to know at present what you would say is the approach with which social work education takes place in classrooms in, for example, the University of Southern California as compared to India.



GM: Let me try and see how best I can touch upon some topics. Talking specifically about our School, I guess I would like to say that we have a very progressive Dean in our School and she has headed I think School of Social Work at one of the most prestigious universities in the nation and then come to us. She is very forward thinking, to look at social work from an interdisciplinary perspective; not drawing in just sociology and psychology but looking at any and every related disciplines, you know economics, business, medicine, and public health and so on and so forth. I see that tremendous change in terms of the academic curriculum content. I wanted to share my thoughts on Social Work in India at this point of time, based on my conversations with my esteemed colleagues here. The focus in India from a developing perspective is very interesting and I think what used to be the flow of knowledge from the western world to here can definitely be complimented with the flow of knowledge from this side of the world to the other side of the world.

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I think my global program, hopefully, is a drop in the ocean in that sense. The professional identity itself is changing. I joke around in my class, why can't you call yourself social engineers? Or consultants for the social sector? So the professional identity is definitely changing. Again in the US, I can talk about Southern California, specifically, in the academic world I would say you do have a dominance of a very micro-level focus, which is where you are focusing on individuals and families and very therapeutic and very clinically oriented practices. But definitely with interest expanding in the macro concentration, and hopefully me and a couple



of my colleagues, we are constantly trying to shout out loud, to make our identity visible. I would see a day where the macro perspective is well entwined in there. Social work is almost a continuum from micro to macro, which I believe we say that in the classes, but I am sure there will be definitely a change in that perspective.

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You know, in the western world more so, with a lot more of the developmental literature and development related experiences coming from this side of the world. So, we are likely to see some changes. Also, the world of technology, now that we live in a very technology oriented world or the world of media. How important is media for social work? I must say we are one of the schools in the social work academic discipline in the US that have a very strong media component, where we believe that media should be integrated. Any form of media, whether it is Community Theater, whether it is radio, community radio or digital media, or internet based media is integral for community practice, for advocacy, for research - so, definitely I see an increase. At this end, I am quite happy to see the whole advancement in media with that and I hope we see more of pollination of those ideas.

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The third thing that I want to talk about is the global perspective. Now that we live in a very globalised world, it is important for social workers in any and every part of the world to



understand the global perspective, whether it be for the students in the western world to gain a perspective from the east or from the eastern world to get a perspective from the west so that, you know, you are really prepared to be a trained professional to address global issues. A lot many of the things that happen in today's world has global ramifications and so that is a very important arena. And last but not the least is a policy practice which, if I go back in time, and I hope I am saying this right, was a component that was not very visible in the curriculum. It's now gaining a lot more practice. In fact, there are students now expressing an interest in just policy alone and even interesting dual degrees. In my university, we have MSW Law Degree combinations, we have MSW Public Administration combinations, and we even are proposing an MSW Public Health and finally MSW MBA. I mean there are very few takers and I am hoping something like Social Entrepreneurship would be a nice nexus between the two disciplines.

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You know, these are some thoughts of mine on the whole professional content in terms of social work, as you compare across the two different sections of the globe.

Q: Its TISS' 75th year and we are going to start the celebrations soon. Is there something you want to say to your alma mater? Any message, anything that you would like to say.

GM: Well, first of all I really have to acknowledge the Professors, the director of the Institute was...I forgot the name I am sorry... ah! Dr. Armaity Desai. Prof. Parasuraman was my Professor. All my faculty members, the director of the institute, to my colleagues and everybody,



staff at the institute... I am very thankful for all their support they have given me. It has gone a long way in shaping me to an individual that I am today. So a big thanks you for that. I do remember very vividly the day during our graduation convocation which was in the courtyard, not at the fancy shmancy arena that you have now. When we wore the hat that we had then, I think it was a very good sense of accomplishment and I believe it is important that I take pride in that because that has helped me further my interest in my career and to where I belong to.

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So all I would say is I am proud to be associated with the number one school, an alumnus and lasso, an alumnus representing Tata Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Southern California and I am hoping we can bridge the USC school of Social Work and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences productively to have some very exciting scholarly and academic connections. I am hoping to keep the flag of TISS high and I am again very proud of my alma mater. Thank you for this opportunity.