



Dr. Shobha Kapoor

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Camera/Sound: Ms. Shilpi Gulati

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Dr. Shobha Kapoor has done her MA, M.Phil and Ph.D. From TISS. She works in the area of substance abuse. She is author of the Directory of Substance Abuse Services in Mumbai, published by TISS.



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Q: Would you like to begin by narrating your association with TISS?

SK: I came in for the entrance exam in May 1982 and then got selected and was in the batch from then to 84.

Q: What was your specialisation?

SK: Medical and psychiatric social work.

Q: How did you find the campus?

SK: I just remember the time I joined TISS in the rainy season. It was lush green and beautiful. These are the best memories of TISS as a student. It was such a beautiful campus. And lots has changed since then. I think it has expanded and there are more students than there were during our times. It was a different kind of feeling. Now I understand that more people need to be sensitised and more priority given to social work professions. This campus had to expand. It's a little different from what it was then.

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Q: Can you tell us hostel stories?

SK: I think our favourite spot was Subhalakshmi. I remember the walks in the rain at BARC. I don't know if they are still allowed or permitted. I remember playing western music with my friends. Badminton and shuttle. Very interesting.

Q: Are there any professors you remember from those days?

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SK: I think most of them had a very significant influence starting from Dr. Grace Mathew, Dr. Purnima Mane. There was Mr. and Mrs. Panwalkar . These are some of the very inspiring teachers at TISS...also Suma Chitnis.

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Q: Would you like to speak a little more on how the professors would behave with the students?

SK: Grace Mathew was very involved with each one of us. She observed, she listened and she gave a completely individualised training to each of us. I miss her because she is not there any more. But there was a certain level of professionalism that was demanded. I was really lacking in that area and I see her..throughout just slowly and slowly pushing us to come to that level of perfection that she wanted. Whether it was our writing skills or editing or even presentations or to understand a problem. So she will always be the most influential person in my life as a social worker.

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Suma Chitnis has influenced us completely because there was nothing that she prepared and come for classes. There was no preparation and it was all spontaneous. She made it very interesting and lively and classes were very very..we all got involved.

Q: Can you tell us about your fieldwork experience?

SK: Here I was influenced by the training given by the Panwalkar. . Mrs. Panwalkar was I think my group work supervisor. So I was placed in the Govandi slums and everything that I



learnt about community work, integrated community healthcare...All these sort of ideas on urban planning involving people, mobilising resources...These came from my first year experiences in the community setting and with the Panwalkars as my teachers and guides in the community work.

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It makes a lot of sense to see the kind of work we are doing now at the field. A lot more focus is on the systems and community level interventions.

Q: Did the TISS guidance help?

SK: Yes, it opened horizons and made us think. Of course when you go out you also learn a lot from the field and you come up with theory which you again contribute back to the body of knowledge that you come from. So it's a process that is to and fro. At the time that we were students we did not have HIV pandemic and all these kinds of epidemics that came up..substance abuse..injecting heroine..much more changes happened at the system level.

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I think that time I was doing my M.Phil and PhD so lot of my work at the PhD level in TISS influenced my work. What I was reading and what I was trying to find out in the field made a lot of sense.

Q: What was your thesis on?

SK: It was looking at the role of social support systems in recovery from addictions. One was really looking at focus on the individual. With so far in addiction studies there was just focus



on the individual. But then the family came in as a power, the family systems and as we moved ahead it was more of a community - level interventions like self-help groups and peer-support programmes. That made a lot of sense.

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Q: Can you tell us some of the challenges that you faced on the field?

SK: Not really challenges but there are lessons that you learn. It's just that I chose to remain in community based intervention and community settings. Preparation in TISS really set the stage on how to develop work with primary health care, how to explore the whole concept of providing maximum to people in such settings and then how do we develop cost-effective interventions. The whole concept of full service centres which just don't cater to one special specific problem but where a range of problems can be dealt with.

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These are the things that one is exploring even when one is looking at the field of substance abuse or HIV AIDS we need to offer a range of services to our client groups and beneficiaries. I think in marginalised groups you are looking at deprivation in different levels. My whole effort in the field has been how to maximise different types of resources together to the client system and a lot of that has gone back into my PhD. and M.Phil reports. Because more and more I feel that the role of social workers in the field will be changing. And that more and more you will see workers as real animators, catalysts for change. Much more social mobilisation. Case work is also there..I think we have to look at more common sense



counselling techniques where you give brief interventions to people instead of long-term casework approaches which needs to change.

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A lot more focus, we need to look at how our people spiritually which is what I am involved within understanding myself first but this was something that I felt was missing. And I spoke to Grace Mathew about it. She said that in my new edition of casework you will find that separate chapter. A lot of it in the beginning, as Grace Mathew said had come from Western paradigms whatever concepts still are in social work. Much more now you see that the social workers now within the country itself are contributing more and more to certain eastern thoughts and paradigms which should be incorporated in general social work education. I think TISS is very open to all this new developments in the field.

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Q: Now there are a lot of specialisations in social work. Coming from someone who has been in the field, what is your opinion on it?

SK: I think there are certain individuals who have aptitude for a certain area and they may excel and be useful to be in the area but when you are in the field you see that there is an integration of people's problems. Its just so many things that you are dealing with. So you have someone with an alcohol problem and you can have legal issues and so many other concerns. But I am not so sure whether it is feasible for so many specialists to be available when you are looking at developing programmes in disadvantaged groups.



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It's just not feasible and sustainable. Perhaps these specialists can be involved in such integrated care but I feel more and more there will be I'm not in the social work education area but I think generalists will play a much important role in the coming years. Even though we have specialisations for instance I did medical and psychiatric social work but I found myself more involved with other things like community organisation or social mobilisation and social activism. So it's basically how you give exposure to the students. You could be from a specialist course but if you get exposure in other fields and other forms of service delivery systems that one is developing. I think it is easy for students to pick up the skills and they should be placed in different settings. At least one different setting from what their specialisation currently is.

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That gives them a lot of exposure. You have the skills to be able to pick up all these. I think one cant say whether it is necessary to have so many specialists services or not but I think TISS is one of those premier institutes who are providing that kind of opportunities. But the focus must also be on the capacity of students to function as generalists is very very important. Because social workers..we are looking at people from certain type of community or certain groups that come to us and for them to have very specialist services in some centralised space they can't access it. It's not attractive to them. Something should be easily accessible to client groups. Often with too much specialisation we don't want to go to different settings like slum community or some other kind of area where you want to work.



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So expectations in the student itself would want to stay in a certain system which may not always be responsive to people who need such services. I don't know what you feel about it.

Q: One of the major strands of social work is to link theory with practice. How do you think TISS fared in that aspect?

SK: Two years was not enough to test theory with practice. It's only much later when you are in the field for years you are able to question things. You understand the limitations..or you add something more to it. It's never during your student years that you learn that. And for me it was much later when I was working in a different setting, different context doing different kinds of national or international level work.

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Then you start realising and look at different cultures and you look at what are the commonalities across cultures. You developed a different kind of global perspective where you are actually looking at how do you look at strengths within cultures, how do you look at strengths within different groups instead of focussing more on problems. I think that became a change. More strength based than problem based approaches because these are things you learn and one of them is faith and spirituality that people have when you see recoveries in people with mental health problems. Schizophrenia or you see addiction or you are looking at terminal conditions. So you have to look at social work interventions to capitalise on strengths of people.



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What they already have and not what they don't have. Because often you can't connect..to a certain extent material support and others you can lobby and get things but where the internal resources are missing you just have to start working on the strengths of let's say...their family system or individual or the community. So this is one thing that helped me look at things. The other thing that I saw was how to build social capital within communities and a lot of problems and issues that we face across the world is the depleting social capital among networks in people and communities. So that has been a major area of my research and rethinking. Any kind of social problem that you see... you see depletion in social capital resources and that has a lot of effect on whether it's the economic situation or the mental health situation or familial situations. That is one area I am very much interested now.

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Q: Can you talk more on social capital and what you mean by it?

SK: Social capital is really looking at the capital within social networks. Trust is the currency which keeps these networks together. How you look at globalisation and urbanisation and all kinds of migration that is taking place across cities, across different countries. You find that what is depleting is social capital. Trust and the feeling of ownership or the bonding that networks provide. That is slowly breaking down and that has its effect on different types of problems that you see in society. Right from economic situation to sense of alienation to the sense of feeling marginalised, disadvantaged.



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It's really breaking up with your roots. In fact there is a move in certain parts of America where there was migration from rural to urban areas as you are seeing the reverse process now because people are realising the importance of network ties. How they helped you to have that confidence in whatever you are doing. That you can see is crumbling. Where people are moving from Banaras to Bombay or where people are moving from Bombay to the United States..we are losing out on networks. As the world shrinks network breakdown will be much more in the future. So we have to look at how to strengthen these networks either by creating much more opportunities for let's say..organised systems of support where again the role of hobby clubs or faith based organisations..all these within the community and social workers may have to tap into these areas of social capital building.

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Q: Any message that you would like to give to TISS?

SK: Congratulations! May they continue to create more and more sensitive, compassionate and loving people in the world. Thank you very much!