



Mr. Benson Isaac

Interviewer: Prof. Anjali Monteiro

Camera/Sound: Prof. K.P. Jayasankar

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Benson Issac graduated from TISS in 1998, specialising in urban and rural community development. He has been working in the development sector for over 12 years. During this period he has been associated with child rights issues, anti- communalism initiatives, has worked for Greenpeace as a climate change campaigner and also worked as faculty of Social Work at St. Joseph's College. Through his involvement with Samvada he has done extensive work in sensitising and mobilising youth around social change, trained youth in alternative livelihoods and contributed to developing the body of knowledge around youth studies. Exploring the politics of knowledge and traditional livelihoods, especially handicrafts has also been a significant area of his engagement. He currently teaches at the Azim Premji University, Bangalore.



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BI: I really had not thought about TISS specifically when I was going to do my post graduation. I had applied to JNU and TISS was actually an afterthought. In case I don't go to JNU then I should have a second choice. I got through. I think when I came to the entrance exam the place actually got me. I felt that this was a very nice place. The campus was fun, the general feel of the campus was nicer than what I had experienced in JNU which is really huge floating around the place.

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I thought that TISS was actually a nice place. Then I tried to find out a bit more - about the Institute and about the kind of work in the Institute. I was interested and once I got through I was still waiting for my JNU results. I think the first few experiences were actually going out for Institution visits and the space that it had... Coming from St. Xavier's College where life is directed very clearly what your role is, what you want to do, the typical undergraduate college. Coming to TISS was a complete sense of liberation where you realise that there is a lot of space, there is a lot of freedom, a lot of possibility for fun. I think that really took me in.

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When I got through both I was torn as to which place I should go to. I decided to stay on at TISS mainly because the fieldwork is one thing that interested me. There was a possibility for exposure that I did not have in Bangalore where middle class...the opportunities that opened up here would not be that way anywhere else. I think my only exposure other than the urban context were holidays back home in Kerala. There were typical restrictions about the way you behave, and what you wore. I think the possibilities of seeing another kind of world was what excited me and took me to TISS.

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Then on I wouldn't call it a smooth ride, it was quite a roller coaster for all the language...Having mostly spoken in English, being fairly comfortable in Hindi and Malayalam...the challenge of speaking in Hindi which was just another textbook language. I think the kind of diversity one found on campus was something that was fascinating.

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Mixing with a totally different bunch of people - each one having different rhythm, reading aloud in the room to find how comfortable it is to learn English. There was a range of things that happened in the room that was a very different experience. That set the tone for the course itself. The kind of life on campus - there were a lot of things that you saw outside.

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I did Urban and Rural Community Development. The way I saw it in the prospectus in terms of community organising was something that took me. My second option was Family and Child Welfare which I was not very excited about doing and when I got URCD I was very happy. The funny thing is I ended up doing fieldwork in Meljol.and that was an FCW setting at that time. When I left the Institute, I went back to work with Meljol. I started the Bangalore branch of Meljol soon after I left the Institute.

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I remember there was lots of confusion and discussion regarding how we should go to FCW. Also by then I had realised that there were these very strange departmentalisations. At the end of the course, I resolved it a little bit. There was no strict FCW and no strict category. I think the URCD course also helped in building a perspective.

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We shy off from family settings, child welfare etc. and it was something very different. There was a connection in between. I think one is the way the course is structured, the course delivery itself, the content is one part of it but what I really enjoyed was the course delivery. From the regular classroom lecture kind of situation in the undergraduate programme to coming to a smaller classroom, lots of discussions and lots of assignments. The fact that there were courses where there were no exams. Initially it was a fancy that there were no exams and there was free time. But the fact was that there were presentations. There was a certain amount of rigour that automatically came, nobody forced it.

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I think the gradual shift from "I need to do this for the exams to finish this" to actually figuring out what they want to do and what they were interested in is something that happened through the way the course happened. There were lots of assignments, some of them were taken lightly and some of them actually ended up making us read a lot. The library was really good. Even today I miss that library. Specially the library that was in the main block and the way it was and the fact that you could get lost in it. The range of books was fabulous.

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It clearly helped. The combination of fieldwork with the kind of practice that ends up getting followed in the classroom. And also the kind of teaching that the group discussions lead to, when you are doing community organising or group work. A lot was experienced in the way the classroom teaching happened. Then of course there was interactions in between, across diversities that happened which I think would not have happened. That kind of diversity does not exist in the country.

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There was a Delhi, Bangalore, Bombay... you finally broke out of which is what you gravitated towards slowly... you broke out of that crowd. It might be because where you are placed for the fieldwork, or the way through classroom activities. I think the fluidity that existed between the classroom and the hostel, campus journey was the best part. At that point I really miss having a lot of theory. I wanted to do a lot of theoretical stuff. Now looking back..I think have picked up on the readings as I have through the years depending on what I have done.

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I hope that there were some more theoretical aspects..some more disciplinary focus on some of the aspects.

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I think there was many people that shaped the experience of TISS. One of whom I remember is Maveen... the kind of fun and informality she brought into the classroom and the depth that is there, taught us disaster management. She did it very well... the kind of range she addressed. She was also my fieldwork supervisor. She came with me to fieldwork a number of times. We went together to the hamlets. The conversations that happened along the way... lot of dilemmas... lot of confusion.

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I remember as a part of our conversation I kept telling her that we should shut down the field project action in Kumbharwada. Not much seems to be happening. I think to carry those conversations through without being stopped. And I was just being very critical about it. I think to talk through this was enriching. Again I think a lot of experience from me was from

the fieldwork context. Because that was something that I was scared about. I was also very nervous. Being able to talk about it... someone who would push you into it. That is something that really helped.

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Lots of fun and madness and laughter. I actually spoke Marathi by the end of the first year. He told me by the end of the second semester you should do sessions in Marathi. The first semester I was placed in Kannada speaking, Urdu speaking schools. In the second semester I actually went to Marathi schools. I did make a fool of myself the way I spoke Marathi..but I think I managed fairly for children in the classroom..they also laughed at me and figured out what it is..

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The kind of work that Meljol did- to get children from urban middle class places to a twin programme- it taught me a lot at that time.

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When I was teaching students of social work in St. Xavier's College, trying to get them placed, that's when it really made sense to me that the fact that the Institute had such a large number of field action projects. There was a certain kind of approach to fieldwork, a certain range that was available in terms of the organisations available which a lot of other institutions miss. They are involved directly in setting up processes. And in seeing how these things work. In other organisations... a lot of the organisations have this specific context in which they work... their funding... their realities... and the kind of change that is happening. The rigour of some of the field action projects is there.

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It helped the student to learn more because the student was helped in that process. With a large number of organisations the students are meant to visit, you could do something for two days and then you are happy. Here the field action projects have a centrality to them... student and the kind of role that was designed for them... the kind of task that one was set up for.

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I understand that because these were field action projects they had to do it... other organisations also do it, but the focus on learning for the student is simply missed out by a lot of organisations. And it ties it in quite well- the way the research and field practice happens. And if someone taught these courses... who had field action projects... the kind of experiences they brought into the classroom was also very exciting. Also the role of the institute was something... you saw that field action project, the institute and the classroom and the student, the kind of interaction that happened was made possible because of the institute. I think a lot of other institutes miss this. Students also make a lot of... I realise when you are not directly involved with something students also start taking you far less seriously.

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And reading information someone else is working on and also trying to...

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While at TISS, no. But I have done lots of work in the relief camps in Gujarat. Also I have done some tsunami relief work. But at the time of the tsunami relief work I came in touch with Vidya Rao... lots of TISS people. Through the course... not really.

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One thing I saw on campus that struck me is the gender ratio. The fact that there were far more women than men. And the fact that I hung out with a lot of women..it caused lots of confusion in the men's hostel and lots of comments about that aspect. Sometimes I wonder if there was also a class thing. A lot of men who came into the institute were from rural background and not from middle class backgrounds and the women were from middle class backgrounds. So I don't know whether I gravitated towards a certain category of people.

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It all sorted itself out slowly. We had lots of fun. We had mad cooking sessions... which was not technically allowed but we had it. Especially students from the North-East. I got along very well with a lot of them and we often had meat bought from the market, cooked in the hostel. It would take hours in that hot plate. The madness of trying to bring a little bit from the dining hall, a little bit from the staff quarters and cooking some of it yourself.

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The fact that the campus had faculty, staff, students created a completely magical space. You saw different kinds of people, interacted differently, and it was not just the students. That way the campus was different. The fact that it was a smaller campus than much larger institutes... it also brought people into contact with each other. The Ganpati and the visarjan... and the madness of that... and celebrating that whether it was cooking pongal on a open fire outside the dining hall, celebrating Onam and I think there was so much that happened. It was not a very directed, controlled space.

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I loved the parties in the dining hall... series of long drawn fun sessions and also Meghmudra. It allowed people to jell well into each other. It was fun and one need not be stuck with

academics. I think we helped each other a lot with assignments, group assignments that happened and sitting late into the night. I think we discovered rules after we broke them. We used to sit in the dining hall after the allowed hours... and we used to climb through the window... I think we forgot the door... I used to jump through the window after coming from the men's hostel because there was a table I always sat at. Each one had figured out their own way of negotiating and navigating the campus. There were our favourite places in the campus. I used to love the courtyard... used to sit there for hours and sing... chat.

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Quintessence..the fact that anybody who was doing anything could be a part of it..There was not any botheration about quality. I don't know when it finally ended up being a competition. Also remember the film club that was there... can't remember the full name of the club though... I saw some of the best films in that phase that I was in the campus.

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Sometimes it used to happen on Monday night after fieldwork. Otherwise it used to happen on Thursday evening.

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One thing that struck me is the aesthetics of the campus. When I came back from anywhere else the fact that the campus was very beautiful, green which is a huge thing in Bombay to have that kind of a space. It was not swanky... but it had facilities. That was something I really enjoyed about the campus, and the stone corridor...very beautiful space. It practically allowed you to feel nice.

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Maybe it is something that I have always had about spaces that jar...and I have hated classroom buildings that are built in the matchbox style. Most colleges are built in that mode. Our classrooms are not like that.

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For me, being on campus for some time was a shock. Fieldwork... I always wanted to do advertising and got bored of doing something like CAT... that's where this whole thing of JNU and TISS arose. Once I was there I overreacted to many things... there were certain things about idealism. I remember giving away lots of stuff that I had... I had a dome tent... they were things that were upper middle class..

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I used to love trekking... I still do. It was a part of discovering that world of inequality, poverty... my interpretation of it was very personal in some ways. I remember when towards the end we had JPC and there were these big discussions about who should be let into campus as part of the placement talks. My batch was the first one where a large number of people sat for the PPTs. We had a huge fight about whether we should let them in... come and do the PPTs... or students may choose you...

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Finally they did come... and I remember boycotting it and not going for the talks... that I didn't want one of these organisations. Then I decided to take Meljol, because I wanted to come back to Bangalore, because there was some family crisis that had happened. I was set on working for an organisation that worked in the rural area. Once I came back I realised that I wanted to work there. I did not want to work for other organisations.

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It was a sense of that familiar... shift from the campus to the outside world that there is sudden need to reconnect because your friends are doing something different. You're seen as doing something strange. I used to get extremely irritated...whenever there was garbage on the streets, whenever there was a problem, people used to say, "Aren't you a social worker? Don't you solve these problems?" And it was this big thing trying to explain what social work is.

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With friends I think there was this huge negotiation that had to happen... by taking on this fundamentalist position about things... that needs to be renegotiated. Some of it was a painful process and the others loosened out comfortably. It became slightly more balanced. But Meljol itself... I came with a huge amount of confidence... somewhere in TISS the diversity of things that you do, the talking presentations, doing something, and you are putting yourself out there... having arguments with people..made me feel very confident about starting something in Bangalore.

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I went to schools and they said that I was really young. They were really surprised at how I could do teacher's work very surely... child rights at that... they asked me who my boss was. I told them that I am as any person in Bangalore is...I don't have a boss. That's when a huge network got built, they were also trying to work with other organisations, build contacts for Meljol... because I wanted children to go somewhere for exposure and all these things. That's a phase I built a large amount of contacts. Meljol really didn't want to do with anti-nukes and anti-dam. This was the platform that I needed..I could offer this to any network meeting I went...

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Built this really active Narmada Solidarity Forum which somehow went back to the Meljol programme... though it was not strictly part of the Meljol programme. And the children came and learnt the Narmada song. They sang at protests. It was an exciting way of trying to continue what was on campus. For me, the campus was a lot about singing, lot about discussions... intense arguments vis-a-vis changing the world..

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A lot of that continued in the space that I was trying to create with other people... And at the same time there was this whole disconnect with family, old friends. They saw you becoming this strange human being. You are saying all kinds of nonsense... and you are always landing up having arguments with people. That was a strange part of coming out of a campus that was very tense. A lot of course which actually throws you into multiple situations where you're something struggling to come out.

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I think this is partly a little bit of arrogance, overconfidence... and there is a good part that is you are ready to do things. But I think the arrogance part... now looking back I realise was something that must have really affected lots of people. Specially with family I think they had to deal with it. I think the fact that you dressed very differently, you longer worried about wearing formals... you develop a certain style that is part of being on the campus.

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With other organisations the fact that there was a huge amount of exposure that had happened... reading and these things... that after Meljol I moved into organisation called Samvada, where they had lot of work with the youth. A lot of the work was with young

people from rural backgrounds. It was a sensitisation, mobilisation programme, taking underprivileged, disadvantaged young people... part of politicising their own experience and understanding and linking them with people's movements and things like that.

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I also realised that TISS had given me a lot of contacts outside of the Karnataka context, which was something the organisation at that point did not have... in terms of people who were going out and speaking Hindi... there were 2-3 people who already did and contacts with people's movements. I was able to expand that range to include different things to Bastar, to Himalayas... to different places which was part of the continuing networks that I had from TISS. It was an exciting phase, trying to build groups, being told by your groups that you are really controlling, you are trying to dictate what they do...

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... and in that process you are working with somebody... sensitising, mobilising... and suddenly the whole thing comes back at you and people point fingers at you... you are a funded organisation... you get foreign funds... trying to deal with all that. Sometimes I went back to experiences we ourselves had in TISS where we were critical of the department and the faculty. Somewhere I relive some of those moments.

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And the fact that it happened... some very flashpoints that happened between faculty on campus... I was able to look at how some of the faculty actually responded to the rules, views... then I did a small stint with Greenpeace. I was with Greenpeace for about 3 years, which was exciting. But I realised that Greenpeace is not my personality. So I went back to Samvada to work on alternate livelihoods..

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That was the time when constantly we were talking about which was also the way I wanted to look at it... which was about protest... lot of anti-development positions. What happened later on is through this I have also realised that lot of the young people that I have worked with... because of the situation they came from... they were politicised...they had a strong opinion about things. When they came to the realities of what they would do in their lives, they ended up becoming courier boys, ended up doing restaurant work... that really frustrated them.

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They were not able to look at... on one hand there was this coming together for solidarity- Muslim youth talking together about community, talking through these issues. And then your life becomes this... that I have no option but go back and do the things that I want to do... and there was a lot of frustration and anger with the young people we worked with..

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We were totally confused as to what to do with them. At that point we realised we needed to talk about livelihoods... in a big way... not the typical income generation, microfinance way... looking at it as an alternate livelihood scheme that devised a programme that looks at agriculture, crafts and traditional livelihoods is one aspect of it. And also other livelihoods which would keep them in their communities and context..

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..without having to leave to come to the city... and go somewhere else to find the work. So we came up with a childcare management programme... that was for girls from the government sector... take care of children of women from the sector... because it had happened that children had been given for adoption. I think the kind of change that happened from anti,

struggle protest to actually saying that there are other forms of resistance, resist through the kind of choices we make...and it doesn't have to be because you have the luxury of making a choice...doesn't give you too much money...

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There is possibility of the youth to be mobilised in a certain way, to also find alternative livelihood options. Today there is talk of green jobs. Part of what we did contributed to it... talk of solar, green energy technicians... lot of it is stuff that is picked up here and there from the courses. But at that point it really did not make sense. I think that is something that struck me about the course... the huge amount that is thrown at you...both experiences and content... which slowly unravels as you go...

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Now its 13-14 years since I left TISS. There are still some of these moments where I think I would have paid more attention to this lecture. Or at that point I had a huge opposition to... I remember this particular session we had about livelihoods... and I thought it was not such a cool thing to do... you could be more political. At that point the thought was not good enough. Those transitions have happened. I think being in touch with people, talking through some of the confusions we had...our own experiences...

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A lot of us came out extremely idealistic. It's not that idealism is gone but you have also figured out that everything needs to be balanced. People that you are pushing also have to deal with it. I think that was something that we were constantly told through the course. But I remember these big meetings that happened on campus about hostel timings. We were not in a position to dialogue at that point. Some of us reflected on why we take those positions. It helped understand a lot of things that we've done later.

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The fact that there is an informal network of alumni who talk to each other..I am also married to one. We talked a lot about how TISS has shaped our lives... what it means to marry someone like that. I think those connections really help. I have used a lot of resources from you... films... that one on identity... reactions from different groups of people. It's not a very simple film... it's got a lot of layers. We've done film screenings for Kannada speaking groups... that gave us lot of confidence.

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I have not really come back to the institute and seen how it has changed. I think if some of the warmth and intensity in campus that it always had... if that can remain. It was something I experienced on campus in terms of the fact that Grace Mathew would come for celebrations... and sing a song. There was an emotional connect beyond the political ideology.

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It was a nurturing space. If that can be there along with the intellectual growth...and being cutting-edge in terms of the information and knowledge that you have. If the nurturing part is there that would be the greatest contribution that TISS can do to the education landscape. Because a lot of institutions don't do that. Nurturing as a person does not happen. They train you to be what the course intends you to be. TISS turns that magic into nurturing.

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It might be the culture of the Institute or probably individuals who brought it there..s. hould keep the balance. Also a very strange thing... from the context of when I have interviewed people to join the teams that I have been working in... since the restructuring a lot of people have not applied to organisations like Samvada. I don't know if people are going to other



kinds of organisations... or whether it is part of the consciousness anymore. I don't know what it is. A lot of people earlier did apply to Samvada. At various points there have been people from TISS who have worked in the organisation.

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But I think..I am not sure maybe the course has changed since restructuring. Maybe students don't look at organisations. Or organisations can't connect back.