



Mr. Vimledhu Jha

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Vimlendu Jha is the founder of Swechha, a leading youth organisation of the country - working on issues of environment and active citizenship. He also runs another social enterprise called 'Green the Gap' that works with the underprivileged youth around sustainable fashion. He works very closely with UNDP for a decade and also serves as a consultant to several national and international institutions. Currently he is being nominated as a Global Economic fellow 2012.

He was also one of the 6 world leaders profiled by CNN International for over a year for their special project 'Be the Change', the only one from Asia.



Q: Could you please tell us how did decide to do this course, how did you come to TISS, what were your motivations?

VJ: Exactly I was studying here in Delhi at St Stephens, I did not know much about social work. It was not a professional choice for me. It was just an accident that I started volunteering for several movements and campaigns in Delhi because I felt there was a void that was there amongst young people in the society in terms of young people participating for , it was getting to be , sound uncool to be socially unaware and participating.

1:09 – 2:14

That was the time I started for campaign We for Yamuna and saw the power of people in that sense. In 2000 when I started this within 9 months we actually had thousands of people who became part of it. I was feeling some challenge in terms of, it was more of creating noise more of looking at anger and anguish and not looking at can I fundamentally change things because of the campaign that I have run and that was where the desire to study social work in some way came. It wasn't something to seek a better job, you know if you look at the entire departure it term of looking at social work. Social work has unfortunately or fortunately the it has become a form of education that fetches jobs and fat jobs for people. For me it was just a inner desire and void that I had within me that can I study what I want to do as I had already started to do it.

2:14- 3:03

It wasn't anything in concrete, anything specific that was missing in my approach. That's where I thought I should join TISS. The closest cost that I did not know, there was no



specialization. I did not want to be a doctor in social work; I did not want to fix things. I did not want to be a fixer, Mr Fix things in that sense? The closest and the most neutral course that was available at that point was urban and rural community development. Looking at what is development at the end of the day, how do people participate or why do people do not participate. That was my accident as I would call it. Getting into TISS was an accident.

3:03-

Q: We want you to share with us some anecdotes, some experience of you being at TISS as a student? What was life on campus like?

VJ: Quite a few things. I remember when I joined TISS; I had already done some bit of work here in Delhi. Then I joined TISS in 2001. I really believed in a few things and had achieved a few things, smaller things in year 2000-2001. Within a month of being in TISS was feeling that is this I want to do. I am leaving the field behind I am getting into the theory of change and leaving that change. I don't know that once I go back I will be co opted by this entire TISS enigma in the market. There was at that time I think in the first month I went to Janki Andhariya Told them that I want to go back. I don't think I can study here because I think I belong there and I can do much more and I think I was learning as much if not more from the field.

4:07 -4:40

That's when she counselled me and told me well it's important but you can do that all your life and this can happen only now and just see if you can still balance the two and that is not running away. Of course that's where you need to execute your knowledge. So that's one.



Several campaigns, I remember I had lots of confrontations with the authority in TISS. I did too many things which the authorities did not like and I also hear some of them were conspiring to chuck me out of the campus.

4:40- 5:56

And I remember just after Godhra and TISS was not being vocal about it in terms of so many things happening around. People were writing articles and were discussing in class rooms but in terms of really extending yourself to the community or the political position, nobody was doing it. I remember many of us got together and said no we need to stand up. It was really like a fire and became the strongest campaign that I have seen in these two years. It was really organic almost all of us said that we won't attend classes anymore. We went to all these areas which were potentially affected by riots as there were no riots which were happening in Mumbai. But there was fire there and the entire unrest that was there and I remember that as a beautiful experience of mobilisation. And of course faculty came in and I remember Anjali and Jayasankar and all of us use to make this placards get escorted by police vans, run away from the community because we would ask them difficult question , we were asking them why you need to fight when things can just be resolved and who pushes you for fight.

5:56 – 7:22

That was a very interesting anecdote and everything Infact I looked at two years of TISS not as something which was pressure for me. I lived very lightly I enjoyed being there. I did what I wanted to do, so I use to sit under the tree and sing songs. I use to go and watch films,



make films. All kinds of things that TISS allowed. Perhaps I took away from TISS. It was very different; it was a very positive energy. It was also what I wanted from the system. I remember every evening we had a small group with teachers. We had a group called political economy of love. So, we use to sit and discuss theories of love. I think in terms of those two years of mine when I had actually done something in terms of professional gratification, in terms of my personal quest , knowledge and understanding of world , I think it was an interesting stop I would say and it has an interesting contribution to me because most of what I do, I cannot really connect points and say well this what I learned from TISS and that's why I am going to this way now in my current work but of course a lot would be attributed to my interaction with the students , with my faculty , with my colleagues , with the campus itself.

7:22- 9:18

Q: So talking of just this culture within the campus with teachers, students. Tell us a little bit more about what you would do as students.

VJ: I would argue, I was a difficult student. I would not accept things at its face value. It was interesting most of the teachers appreciated that of course sometimes it's a nuisance that you do not allow a thought just to flow through because you need to finish the course and many times I did not allow them to do that not because I was compulsive questioner. Not that I wanted to put them in that little corner. But I liked their engagement because I did not know what isms were. I was discovering those isms for myself and not from the library but from real life experiences from the interaction with faculties, from the practisoners that I was in touch with. So, I see that is something which I enjoyed doing. And I gained a lot from that and my case of argument did not come from the number of books that I read but came from a very plain point of ignorance and no knowledge. A very inquisitive self is what I put forth in



TISS and I think I liked that and teachers and faculty were very co operative in that sense and you actually sit and talk to them for hours together. So one is, inside the classroom , lot of things that I remember , most of the interactions were outside the classrooms. It wasn't that I was doing a public interrogation in terms of how much does he or she knows but it was more of one to one conversations that I had , one to one relationship that I had struck with these several faculties that we had on campus. That is something which I really cherish

9:18-10:36

Q: Any particular faculty member who you think sort of influenced you, caught you at the right time

VJ: There was many. I can't really name one person. I remember, he is no more.., Mr Vikas Pandey was a great inspiration. I use to spend lots of time with him, Manjula, Jayasankar, and Anjali. Many faculties Amita Bhide, Janki Andhariya. So people who were main course facilitators in terms of social work and practise and community organization. to creativity and space which came a lot from Anjali and Jayasankar, philosophy and knowledge which came from Vikas Pandey. Manjula to a certain extent, Manjula was my research guide and I enjoyed thoroughly because I use to hate studying. As growing up you know I did not want to study anymore and I don't want to study anymore and for the first time I realized that studying could actually be fun in some way and those two years can be fun learning for me.

10:36- 12:29

When I went to TISS I wasn't sure that I would come back and start working with Swecha. I had done something which was a very organic campaign that drove me. It wasn't an



organization that I had started. Therefore, I wasn't sure where I will be post TISS. The two places which I had in which faculty had a greater role to assess and play. My first year of field work was with Agni which works in good governance and I remember we were working on electoral reform at that time. Most people should actually have the right to vote and right to vote happens when you have a voter ID. Lot of work that we did in slums in terms of Young people in Vadala area in terms of looking at what is active citizenship ,what is their role as a citizen , what are the keys issues which young people face , can we have joy , can we have fun and still be citizen. Also integrating that with Agni's agenda of good governance. Can these people be part, can they question the corporate, can they question the power structures. So that was my first area of field work. For me field work was not Mondays and Tuesdays as most of the field work, I use to work four day, five days a week. I remember I had a motor bike at that time and almost every second day after the class at 3-3:30, we used to go the field and just go sit with these students , the young people of community and understand issues and things. So, it was for me to study Mumbai as well, as for me to study how slums evolve or do not evolve. What are the issues of governance, what can I do as a person.

12:29

You know when I am entering there without a flag, I did not have a flag, and I wasn't from any organization. I was a student social worker. When you enter a community and say well I want to create a change how will I do it , what will be my first step. It was a great learning and the other secondary experience was amazing- I was placed 6 hours away from Bombay and was working with an organization that deals with homeopathy it is called M L Gavlay trust and still is a very powerful organization. So we were working in Palghar and we use to take truck ride every Monday morning, we use to get up at 4 because there was nothing else,



it was extremely difficult it use to take 5 hours if we cannot take a truck. Truck was 3 -4 hours ride. We used to gets on to a random truck at Thane. We were working in the tribal areas in theses villages , in terms of looking at health was one reason to enter but looking at issues of livelihood for example we had set up several self health groups in these villages. I was very interested in Warli art so we were actually looking at can there be a livelihood project , looking at can that be restored , conserved , can that really bring revenue from them. We use to get theses chart papers, get Warli art on those chart papers bring it to Mumbai, sell it in Mumbai.

13:53-14:44

That was my second year of social work which was very interesting. You know Mumbai which is the financial capital so I had seen poverty there. Looking at challenges that community face there in Vadala in my first year of placement and looking at periphery of at the countryside Palghar. Most of the people actually become the workforce of Mumbai. These are the people who become workers and labourers or most of the time marginalized by something which happens in Palghar or in other areas. So it was quite an interesting contrast and also looking at learning it terms of what is community organization for an urban poor and what community organization for a rural poor is. It's completely different, dynamics are different, resources are different, and power hierarchy is different so it was quite an interesting eye opener for me.

Q: So do you think like what you were studying in class was helping you in your fieldwork?



VJ: It depends on what do you want from the classroom. Sometimes you might feel that it's all redundant, it's completely not connected and that was one of the main arguments which we used to have. Why do we study so many things when we do not really need to use it because we do not use it? We have these things like controlled emotional behaviour and emotionally controlled behaviour, so there are lot of these theories which are taking rounds. Lot of them were very old theories and a lot of them did not make sense. Society and social problems have evolved to a large extent and to still look at that as a strategy to mitigate poverty and mitigate conflicts in the society, I felt some of them were redundant.

15:38-16:41

A lot of it I think it gave perspective. I was looking at most of the things that I have always looked at prior to coming to TISS was (a) problem, (b) the specific problem and my observation and analysis was limited to that problem to that issue or the person. TISS gave me the chance to look at it at a macro level, as a microcosm of a larger scheme. So when I was looking at poverty say in Vadala or look at environmental issues at Palghar, it's not just about Palghar. TISS actually taught me that these issues can happen in Karnataka, Andhra, Bombay, and Delhi anywhere. So to really make those connections at large level so these things are not happening because of misdoings of the local's community, lot of things happens because of misgivings and misdoings of our policy makers. To really make the connect between the policy and the practise and to understand what drives a community.

16:41- 17:05



When you understand the Maslow's hierarchy of need. It varies for different people; it's different for different people. And different people in different cultural context would react to social, ecological or economic problem very differently and that's what TISS made me understand to a certain extent.

17:05-17:46

Q: Just wanted to know a little more about when you started working with Swechha, how did the idea come about

VJ: I started Swecha in 2000, a year before I joined TISS. In one year it became a very very strong campaign and I had only taken one year off from studies and then I was to go to TISS. When I went to TISS the organization shut down because I was the only one full time, it was like baby for me. Then I came back there was nothing left of Swecha. It was just an idea which had caught attention of lots and lots of people. I started working here and there and I took up a job when I came back from TISS. I was completely dissatisfied? It really gave me the feeling of an abandoned baby and that I had something and I had really not taken care of it.

17:46-18:37

So I started Swecha once again in 2004 and this time the previous Avataar of Swecha was creating noise, *hallabol*. This time it was yes it's important to hallabol but it's also important to understand why things are the way they are. In 2000 we were only talking about Yamuna that Yamuna is polluted and in 2004 we are talking about why is Yamuna polluted, and why our forests are disappearing. Why there is no mention of green agenda in any party political



manifesto. Why do children don't study ecology, why do people feel that their water comes from the tap or their overhead tank and not from a river or an underground source.

18:37-20:08

There was a disconnect that was going, so that's when we decided the course called 'bridge the gap'. So, that's one of the main programmes of Swecha right now. There are two main questions which the course tries to ask, can man and nature co-exist and the other is can mankind and prosperity co-exist. It's like a 16 session module that we run in some 13 schools of Delhi and the idea is to relook at that we can us pre - empt social ignorance. . When people ignorant or become obsessed with success that when our education system helps. Our schooling wants to be successful and successful devoid of integrity. Integrity doesn't have any space in the modern idea of success. Bridge the gap is a course which we run, which actually looks at. You don't need to wear Hawaii Chappal and khadi to really be a socially aware citizen. You can be a doctor, you can wear your Levis, you can have your PS 2, and can you still be an active citizen. Can you vote, can you question, can you still not be corrupt and contribute towards better governance? So that was post TISS change in the strategy of Swechha that I have brought in, to look at fundamentals of a social problem, why things are they way they is. Since the last 7 years that Swecha has been operational. We have done several things. Concretely I cannot attribute projects to my learning from TISS. But I am sure there is a lot that TISS would have taught me.

20:08- 21:34



Q: Just wanted you to reflect on the idea of social work as opposed to activism. Where do you think they meet?

VJ: Both have same agenda. Both social work and activism have an agenda to really have a better world. Now one is based on collaborative politics the other is based on in some where confrontational politics. Social work is you know always you will always work with government, you will be softer on your stand, you will not push someone off the terrace, and you will push them to the wall. Activist will actually push them off the terrace and really tell then listen you are just not needed. I see that change. I think TISS is not a course when you say it really churns out social worker. No I have seen lot of social activists that have come out from TISS as well. We cannot box this education saying that it's a status quo promoting educational system or educational institution. It's an institution that builds perspective and now with that perspective whether you are militant about your ideas or you are assertive about your ideas or you are very submissive about your idea it varies from people to people. I think both have equal space in the entire arena of social change and social development and both play similar kind of role.

21:34- 23:26

I know I am repeating myself. But just wanted you to talk a little bit more about like you said being at TISS you got the perspective to relook at the work you were doing. Just wanted you to talk a little bit more about Swecha and how you think something from your TISS education were getting reformed and how was it getting reformed from the education you had taken.

I can't really connect those dots. I don't know. As I told you TISS in not a school that teaches you in just five quick steps to become a change maker or social worker. May it is for a few people, may that's what new TISS is all about. For me it was a two years residency. I look at



two years as incubating my mind, putting my mind in a system where people have seen the world because I have never seen, I didn't know about social work meant. I was an impossible Bihari before I came to Delhi. I was still an impossible Bihari when I came to TISS. Still an impossible Bihari in many ways. But I see TISS not in terms of a place that has a lot of theory or knowledge. I see the space that really can very actively can create an atmosphere where people can interact, engage and learn from friction of ideas and not one sided top bottom approach of idea giving. I don't think TISS should ever be a teacher filling the students with theories of social change kind of a space.

23:26-24: 35

Coming back to your work with Swecha. You have been involved in for more than 7 years from now. What are the challenges that you face.

That's several. It's very difficult to start an Organization in India. It's very different and difficult to run an ecological organization in India. When you don't jargonize your work like you know our work has been with young people. It is not about doing an environment day and water celebration, our work has been with young people on environment every day. We have curriculums running throughout year. Resources have been a great challenge but we have overcome that over seven years now. We are self sustainable organization, almost 50% of resources comes from the services that we deliver and the work we do in schools. We have diversified, right now we have something, and we have fair - trade section to our organization where we make things out of garbage, out of tyre all kinds of things

24:35- 26:01



In terms of programme focus we have looked at. We work at three main verticals or pillars. One is children and active citizenship, the other is youth and civil society and the third is intensive campaign in terms of these are approaches and beneficiaries in some ways. Environment is a base of lot of this. We are also looking at an environment be more than butterflies and trees. Can it also become political in terms of human nature and human interaction? So a lot of Swecha work is about that. Swecha work is about really connecting young people and motivating them to really... There is a cynicism about activism. People are sceptical about Anna Hazares of the world. If nothing happens you crib, if a lot happen from the streets you still crib. So a lot of Swecha work is to really look at. You need to stand up, you need to really take positions, take sides. Whatever side at least, when you take stand then perhaps you will go from the wrong side to the right side. When you are not in the race of taking sides then there is no point that you are here. The philosophy of Swecha work is to really empower young people, to really come out in the open and say what they believe in and do that more. We are not saying we are churning out Gandhis. We say that we are churning out responsible active citizens.

26:01- 27:04

Q: What are some of the key challenges that you face in the field and in your work?

VJ: See a lot of work is dependent on action from the government. When we talk about Yamuna, we want government to do something about it. Many people ask us that for the last ten years we have been campaigning for the river. What has happened to the river and I tell them river has become further black not because of us the river has become black because of our effort. So that's a challenge. Lot of things we are looking at. Lot of change that we solicit from the system sometimes doesn't happen because there are other people who have larger



stake in changing the situation. We can't go and clean the river. We can only symbolically clean the river for example. The Government has to really invest and have the political desire for that change. So, that's a very big challenge that we have to face that we have to work with the government, motivate them bring them to on board and tell them it's important to have a clean Yamuna in the capital of Delhi.

27 :04 –28:48

That's one key challenge that largely we face. The other is to keep people motivated, all of stakeholders that you have lot of changes happen in 10years when you work with young people. It's not a meethi goli that I give them, it's not a small little tablet that I give them then you have this and suddenly you become an evolved responsible citizen. Lot of change for some people, some of the people you work with change happen in 5days for some change after 10 years. Lot of our results are intangible in that way. I can't quantify the impact which Swecha is making. We are not churning out mobile phones that we can say that well I have churned out 20 , 000 mobile phones this year therefore I have had an impact. So that's the challenge we have to position our self and still be motivated when things are not visibly getting different for you. Can you still keep yourself motivated and that's what as an entrepreneur I face that challenge all the time. I don't see any change that has happened because of my work in front of me. Why am I still doing this, what keeps me going and I feel that the change is not happening or the change is happening in a very invisible level. My contribution is very small to that change; we are not making an industry out of the phenomenon of active citizenship for social change. We have a small role to play and we are playing that role and that's about it.



28:48-30:04

Q: It has been only 8 years since you have left TISS not a very long time, do you see the change you are talking about, what you feel about it?

VJ: I have romantic thoughts about the campus , the space for me wasn't just a school as I told you that use to go from 9 in the morning and come by 3 or 6. We just had three hundred people at that time. Right now when I went couple of weeks ago, apparently I heard that there are three thousand five hundred people studying. There is a course on everything and every social behaviour, social phenomenon. I hear that there are courses on even book titles. Somewhere I don't know I am just a little why do we lay one institution with those numbers and those courses why can't we set up different institution why does TISS have to do have everything, why cannot we have 3-4 other TISS that could perhaps do some because somewhere we are diluting the impact because right now you talk about change makers and change maker they are not created in a factory, you have a factory of TISS.