



Divya Raghunandan

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Divya Raghunandan, who did her MA in Social Work with specialisation in Medical and Psychiatric Social Work from TISS in 1999 has worked at Mel-jol, Bangalore and has been Campaigns Director for Greenpeace. She works on issues of renewable energy and clean technologies.



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I was studying Microbiology here in Mount Carmel College in Bangalore and I was all set to be a scientist. Lot of aspirations as to where I would land up. I think somewhere along the line I landed up in HIV AIDS programme. We were studying the HIV virus and stuff like that. One of my teachers shunted me off to a session where we were actually looking at the counselling group.

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Honestly that was shocking for me because as a science student I had never really engaged with the people behind these issues or any of that. It is the strangeness of our education which if you are doing science you know nothing about anyone that that science impacts. That kind of got me thinking a little bit. It kind of impacted me more than regular and I felt that I don't think I can sit behind a microscope...do small little research. I couldn't do that stuff. I had to talk to people.

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That was the time I had a senior Meghna Nayak and another girl whom I knew called Marian Thomas. They were all in Bangalore. I knew they were in TISS, and I had no idea what TISS was about. I was extremely excited it was in Bombay because it was kind of every Bangalorean's aspiration to reach Bombay. I think those were some of the factors that were really exciting. So I thought I should go and write that entrance. I didn't even think I can



make it because I was a science student and I knew very little about social sciences, other issues.

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I barely knew what was happening in the world. The interview process itself was quite amazing because you were supposed to write an essay and then you got into group discussions. I was just saying the things I felt and they were not necessarily the things that I had learnt. As I was in that interview process I felt that this was a nice place to be. the campus, was like really inviting, I really liked it. I didn't expect to get in but shockingly I did. And then when I landed up in TISS and I started taking the courses.

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The first time I called up my mom and said that I can't do this. We had a class on philosophy and we were discussing about history and philosophy of social work but within that we were also talking about philosophical aspects of various things which was new to me. The different in our science education was that it is so linear that you take something and you go deeper into it whereas here we actually had to connect all sorts of things from different fields. The whole interconnectedness of the way we approach every subject was quite overwhelming. And in fact at the end of one month I was like I don't think I can do this. It is really not me, it is really difficult.



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I would land up in the library and interestingly enough the library has huge amount of science literature which kind of kept me going. I kept on reading that and I felt I can not lose what I had and I don't understand what's going on here. Then I met Dr. Jaswal and I was in Medical and Psychiatric Social Work and we worked together. She had a science background and I was talking to her about this total confusion, approach to education. I am saying random things in class that I feel but it's not based on any theory or theorems. We used to have these long discussions on how it is okay. The first month was really hard. The friends I had on campus...it took a while. There was a large group from Delhi...the various arts schools in Delhi...I thought they were extremely elite. We had all that dynamic going on. It was kind of hard...very interestingly enough I was in the Ladies hostel 2.

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Opposite me there was Swapna who is now a really good friend...Swapnashree someone from Orissa. She had actually done her Masters in Central University and landed up in TISS. . She had done her Masters from Central University and landed up in TISS. It was the first time someone from her village had actually got out. She told me later that the first time she came in the way..she actually went home and wrote this article about these elite women in elite colleges in Bangalore and Delhi who have no idea about the world and they just live in their little cocoons and they are here to solve social problems of India. And it was an article in Oriya which much later when we were good friends she shared it with us.



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That was one of the big things that made me stay in TISS. It was that I had so much to learn. Me and a whole lot of us were just stuck in one little cocoon. Didn't really know the world...had no idea of the number of slums that were there in Bangalore. As I was in Bombay I knew it in and out...but I was clueless because I went from this cool Sophia's and this elite Mt. Carmel's...same kind of people that you hang out with. TISS just opened that world for us. Our best friends today are people from places that I didn't know where they were from the map.

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I was initially overwhelmed but TISS for me...what kept me going was the environment on campus...and the fact that there was so much diversity. The fact that there were a group of people speaking only Hindi, there were some of us. English was not all that cool suddenly...so there was also that group...had to break out of your regular modes. That was really challenging. Then I found a couple of teachers anchored me who could understand the whole confusion about being from a particular kind of stream that's very narrow and where you do not engage with other issues.

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I actually chose Medical and Psychiatric Social Work because I thought it was really the human side of the microbiology science that I was doing. Because in some ways when you are doing science in the lab you look at that entire thing as science as neutral. . You



completely remove it from the social context that it is in. For me I just felt that would be the best place where all the work that I know is happening in scientific field gets put in a social context.

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That was very useful. That was the approach that I took. I think that worked quite a bit. One of my field work placements was Kamathipura where it was essentially HIV/ AIDS setting. We were at the Nair Hospital the clinic there and we were doing pre and post test counselling. But at the end of the day we looked at the entire issue..all the issues around that..we looked at the concept of high-risk communities. Is there such a thing? Looking at how we approach the sensitivities around that issue. In fact by the end of my course we were even discussing whether HIV was manufactured by the pharma industry. Even that line of thinking which was something that I had brought myself to think about. Because the kind of medical industry behind that was so huge and we were exploring the kind of profits behind the retroviral drugs at that point of time. While it was so horrific to even engage with that because we could see people suffering on a day to day basis. But the entire politics of how...when you know that malaria and TB cases in this country...the numbers are just astounding...suddenly even at the time...a little more than ten years ago...HIV AIDS had the biggest priority in this country.

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It was clearly driven by a medical agenda. That way the course opened up ways of looking at various layers to an issue. That was very useful. My first year field work was at Observation



Home in Umerkhadi. That was a really tough setting because the extreme levels of violence. The first thing that I was really horrified by was if a child actually ran away from home and the kids used to routinely come up with smart solutions to get away from there. They had something called public hafta which was that when a child was made to walk in all the other guys were made to beat him.

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It was like the child's right violation of the worst kind. The kind of issues they were raising...there were lots of political issues because JAPU, which was Juvenile Aid Police had to bring in ten children everyday...they had a quota..So they were in cohorts with some people who wanted to bring these kids out. How policies are made...how laws are made...how they are circumvented so that you can follow the law. I think those layers became really clear. Apart from that I just loved the fact that in my first field work I was well connected to the network of street children in Bombay...it was great. We would go to a film and we wouldn't get tickets and we would....and some boys would say, "Didi, aap wahan the..woh..Umerkhadi mein" because we played this game and they could get me tickets.

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In some ways we learnt so much about the city. A side of the city that very many Mumbaites who don't go to these kinds of programmes really know. Parallely, we were exploring the city, how development happens in the city. But this was through our little interventions in fieldwork. The fieldwork was the best part of the programme. That is where I did 50% of my



learning or more. And then there was listening to other people's fieldwork. I had a friend who was in the Kachra Wahatuk. In fact we used to hang a bucket and a Dettol soap outside her door because the minute she came in she could go for a bath.

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But that got us talking so much about the issues there. Just the fact that she had to share her food with the guys in the truck. It was really hard for her to do it but she had to do it because that is also a way to build rapport. I think we completely challenged a lot of stereotypes we had held here. We explored the city a lot. And fieldwork just threw us out there saying that I don't care if you have always travelled by a two-wheeler back home.

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You just catch the bus and figure it out. You don't know Marathi...figure it out. That also gave us a huge capacity to cope. Today we deal with a lot of stressful situations at work but it seems easy because you just think back to some of those fieldwork days...those regular campus days were insane. Life after that seems like you can deal with it. The other thing that I really liked was on the syllabus I really liked the psychiatric aspect. Because I was in the Medical and Psychiatric Program. Even though when I entered I thought the health aspect of it was what I would want to invest in from where I had started but the entire approach to Psychiatry was quite interesting. I think that was the time I got interested in theory because we had Parthasarathi Mondal coming then.



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Everyone reacted quite strangely to him because he brought a lot of theory. He'd come from an extremely academic background which a lot of us who had not done enough of that in the past were out of sync with. It became really interesting because it gave us a solid backing of what we are going to do outside. I loved those sessions. Talking about what is normal. Not just the empathy and casework principles we were applying to a child...but...

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So even in the Psychiatric side at one level we were using case work principles to actually look at how you can actually deal with some of the counselling empathetically but on the other side you were also asking really difficult questions about what is normal..Is a majority view normal? Is a minority view normal..? That helped us apply those principles to any situation like I do it right now as well. . Just because it is a majority view and you know...everybody uses it. Strangely enough it came from my psychiatric class. I think those were some of the things on campus.

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While we were on campus we were a bit concerned because we were bothered about was that we were not looking at alternate forms of medicine enough. We were not looking at approaches to it. We raised a lot of questions at that point and I think the institute was not quite prepared or the syllabus was not quite prepared for really exploring alternative forms of



medicine. On the community side of it I think there were a few projects like the Thane project that was being done. It was an experiment that started looking at that.

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But somewhere what TISS left me that with the end of Medical and Psychiatric SW was that my best case would be that I joined a hospital and took down case history and stuff like that. Which again also put me a little bit in a box because I was not so comfortable with that. That was something we kept telling people. There was someplaces like Ashagram outside the campus where you could go. There were places where they looked at community health approach...but they were small and few. I just felt that the course did not give us enough of that perspective. It gives us a more of clinical perspective , especially the psychiatric bit. I actually found myself not being able to go back and work in a hospital setting. Which I found was coming back to the same models of clinical approaches to medicine. Which was conflicting in ghe way I was thinking of it. So, . I never really went back there. I did a block placement at Atmashakti a home for schizophrenics. They were using transactional analysis which is a little bit of a different theoretical approach. But I think it was overwhelming for me. Institutional settings itself for me, were...what I thought we had to move away from...institutionalisation of any form. It had to be something engaging with larger communities. Building the entire medical and psychiatric practice in any work that we did. Not so much clinical by itself.



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I think our year was the big one where suddenly there was a rule where we had to be back in our hostels by 11 and that was quite crazy...the women's hostel is what it was. It was outrageous for us. I remember we protested all night and we were all out all night. This was I think because there was some one had entered the women's hostel and abused one of the girls. We just knew that was the worst form of response to something like that.

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The entire idea that women had to stay was in completely outdated. You know we were out on campus all over the place right there. And it was these gender issues were really stale. I remember the first time in my class we were having a round of why we are in TISS. One of my colleagues said it was to get a better dowry. And we looked up and wondered where we had come. It was quite hilarious so. That was horrific. So we did have some unbelievable caste and gender incidents right on campus...so it was like a microcosm of the country anyway. It was bound to happen. Once when we were narrating field work incidents we were sharing experiences I remember one of my classmates actually talk about there was a rape and the way he had sorted it out was getting the man to apologize to the woman.

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In some ways that was the horrific bit of campus life. It just seemed to be that where we were and where we were actually approaching it is so divorced from what we have been told in class. There were wars on campus. I think there were factions. That really added because it



really made us think what we were standing up to. I think one of the incidents that got us completely crazy were the elections in second year. I was part of a group with 13 of us and unfortunately we did end up being the Bangalore, Delhi...bunch who spoke largely English and a few other friends of mine.

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For some strange reason they set us all up. We were all asked to stand for elections against really nice people who were liked by everyone. They were non-controversial; they were possibly getting fantastic grades or whatever. And we were these bad ones...totally idiotic...we got set up against them. And all we would get is 13 votes on campus which would be each one among us...possibly around 5 seniors who were also like those horrible, bad and written away by everyone.

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We stood for elections and I was actually called Toady. I was named 2 days after I landed on the campus. They said my eyes looked like a toad. Everyone in the campus knew me as Toady and no one knew my name was Divya. When I came to speak for whatever we were doing, people may have seen me, listened, and said she is not too bad. That would be really few. Actually when they went out and saw that the election card said Divya they had no clue who was standing. They absolutely did not know me like that. I think we all had different names. We had multiple identities on campus. It was really quite amazing.



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The other incident I remember which was not really funny but was quite. One of our colleagues who, when we were on rural camp, .he was sniffing some stuff, some drug or the other. One of my friends went up to him and said that he should be ashamed of himself. We are talking of narcotics and that...entire he just acted like he didn't want us to interfere with his life. She thought she ought to take it on. And then all of us landed up and said that this was completely ridiculous.

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We had a bit of a fight. And then he said that we did not know where he was coming from, his past. We pursued it and then he actually told us this entire story how he lived in Panjapole and he was part of an Arun Gawli gang . And told us this crazy story which was almost like out of a book. How there were social workers there and they asked him to do an exam. That is how he actually got in. He said that he was trying to break these habits but it is hard. We were so horrified. We could not imagine that there could be a larger system around these things. That was one of the incidents that put us in our place.

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I remember when I was going one of my friends Surekha was telling us that when we get together we were like carbon monoxide. We were very good on our own but together we were awful. Surprisingly after TISS we actually made friends with all the people who we



thought we were terrible. So now the beauty about TISS is I can go to any part of our country and I can ask who is in that place from the batch and try and get hold of that number.

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10 years later I had gone to Assam recently to Guwahati. I had not met Meghali since I had passed out. I just knew she was there. Just one phone call and the next thing we were staying at her house. Things were like we had almost never left TISS. That kind of bond is still there. People whom we got along famously with and didn't as well. In some ways now what matters is that we were from the same place and we have a shared past.

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We think of a lot of things in the same way. Makes conversation so much more easy. You are not an outcaste in many way. That has been the best part of campus life.

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I mean the ratios were so badly skewed in TISS that was one of the really sad things about TISS. So many women and then you had hardly had any men...just the sheer numbers were completely against us. In fact there were lot of people we knew who were our day scholar's friends from outside...that was more scope there I think...to go out and actually have fun.



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I think on campus there were three guys that everybody talked about. In possibly every batch...so there was nothing on campus, so campus romances. ..Or we were living vicariously through our friends and you know...discussing it down threadbare

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On campus...the drive was where we hung out...the basketball court was there...mostly it was opposite...and at that time chachi's son was getting married...we were constantly discussing and she was telling us. In fact there was invitation for a cup of chai to see the dowry and all of that...We also had a little bit of community life with chachi..Her entire family...across...there was Vijay Punjab...Vijay Punjab now is a really fancy place...I went to it recently...5 years ago, it was really posh...there was this really seedy dhaba...where we could get Alkazar vodka for 14 rupees..So it was like really good...

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We used to get nice sandwiches opposite as well. Then there was Bunty's. That was the regular hangout. Then there was Anushaktinagar canteen where we felt really deprived of our own canteen where we could get some fish.

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Anytime classes would end early we would hop on to the Harbour line and getting out of the town as fast as we could. I think the rule I loved most about TISS is that if you could get out by 11pm you could come back whenever you wanted. I never understood the point of that rule but I just thought it worked for us.

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I joined Meljol straight after. I was quite clear that I was cut out for some sort of community work or work in a city as opposed to a rural area. So it seemed interesting because Benson was the only person running it -out of his bike. It was that all the work that you did was in schools, government schools or private schools. And that time there were very few programmes running in schools. Now it is difficult to get space for a session. Then it was not like that. There we drew on pretty much everything from TISS. We were alone, we were just two of us when we joined them and we were from the boss to the chaprasi - sweeping to designing all our communication.

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We drew from every single course and we went back and reviewed all the games, manuals, the library that much more valuable. Since we started working Meljol was something that has given me all the skills that I applied from TISS and I use all of that even today. The entire thing of being able to multitask and think through various things. I think that was fantastic. We also had certain level of ambition and conviction in ourselves.that TISS gave us.that we



could run something on our own. We were reporting to Bombay but we could raise money and do all the communication ourselves and stuff like that..

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There was ambition and impatience of being 23 and having to do set up something that was really exciting and I think that ambition really came from TISS that you could go out and do that. And that's fine. That phase of my life was really when I learnt to apply every time I learnt in the course. When we got out of TISS we were incredibly naive because all the people around us thought like us. We really weren't arguing ideologies so much with the rest of the world...or we weren't really arguing out approaches with anyone. For we were kind of similar.

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Even our field work settings were kind of attuned to having like that. But when we came out that was the first thing that hit us. Both in our family circles with our friends and also at work. Just the fact that it was a given that so many things people would understand the way we did it and then people were just horrified. Starting with why I would work in a place like Meljol that gave me 4000 rupees when you can come out of TISS and get a big job..

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I think we were contending with a lot of personal issues but having an absolutely great time at work..Everyone who was a friend of ours in Bangalore had to be part of Meljoi. We had grown a really big community here. That was really nice and that was also a kind of...I draw from that right now. Few years later I felt that it was only about what I had learnt or what we were sharing with each other...there was actually a need to go out and build some more perspective, learn some more from other places.

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At that time Greenpeace they were looking for a Genetic Engineering Campaign - campaign to challenge the whole current agricultural paradigm. And look at the engineering technology. For me that was fantastic because it combined the science that I understood and also the approaches through TISS that showed me how this technology actually was messing up current agricultural scenario because we were just taking something from the West and dumping it here.

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It was the perfect job. I was not even so excited about Greenpeace as an organisation.I didn't go there because of environment per se. . Because at that time I thought that Greenpeace was very conservation focussed and that was a problem. But the fact that I could do this work was great. That was how I got in and worked for five years at the GE campaign.



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For me, the biggest thing that I contributed to Greenpeace from my past was for me to challenge the way because it was at that time there were lot of people. There was a lot of direction from our European counterparts where they saw environment as a piece of land or a forest that needs to be conserved. This was conservation kind of approach and very little of social justice thinking in it. And it was almost like social justice is for the human rights types guys. So this divide was quite crazy.

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There were huge, massive battles in the organisation. Luckily it was just building up in India. I joined the second year after we registered; we had a chance to shape it in India today. I work as a Campaigns Director there. Its good because all our campaigns now have a huge people's focus at the center of it, while we don't say that we are an environment organisation.

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That is broadening it out and contextualising those issues to India. This was something that I really drew on my past experience. I drew on people that were there for any of these sessions I could invite people to actually shift the perspective around...The fact that I was connected to a huge alumni really helped. So I think that in that sense and after that I have been extremely and we took 6 people from TISS in the organisation and that itself has changed the way the organisation has thought about various issues.'



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Upto 2005 it was very easy. Fieldwork was really big and somehow the last two years I just felt that lot of students are slightly more academic focussed . At least the ones that would apply to us and whom we would talk to because most of our work is really out there in the field and there is no academic aspect to it. That is something that I have seen little bit changing in TISS. Though I was inspired by the protests that happened against Jaitapur and Jairam Ramesh when he came for the convocation...that was just fantastic. Considering the Jaitapur project is a big campaign of ours because we work on anti-nukes issues.

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Immediately I was calling up and asking the names of people and whether they would be interested in working with us...wherever they are. I think there are always these moments that are very exciting and there are always students who do crazy things . When the Development Studies programme started and this morphed into that my worry was whether we are moving away from a lot of hands-on social work the field aspects that taught us a lot to a slightly different approach. I have to admit that I do not know how the course is structured. That was a bit of a worry but it could also be because young people today want big jobs, they want more comfortable jobs.

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I don't know whether it is having its impact on TISS as well but I have seen that people who are willing to rough it out in the first 5 years are far less and that's a little bit de-motivating.



TISS is possibly one of places where you could get students to do anything initially just to gain experience.

TISS made me who I am today. In fact we were stopping at Tata Port in a marine protected area in Orissa and I went for the Tata AGM...one of the things we did is each of us bought one share...landed up in the AGM to be able to talk to Ratan Tata and I remember the first thing I said is that you have invested in an institution like this..

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And I am here today and I can actually stand up and say like this because I went to that institution that you invested in. So in some ways I think it really made us what we are and its made us strong enough to go back and challenge the very investors or all sorts of people around there. So I think TISS's greatest mirror to itself are the people who have left the campus and have things to say. I totally love the way in which there was so much focussed about the field and around us. So I am just hoping that stays forever. That has added immense value to all if us working outside. That's all I have to say about TISS.