



Ms Freny Gandhi

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Freny Gandhi did her Diploma in Social Service Administration from TISS in 1949, specialising in Family and Child Welfare. She was among the students who went to Kurukshetra to work with the Partition refugees. Subsequently she worked as a professional social worker in Bombay, Gujarat and Canada. She played a pioneering role in setting up various services in areas of mental health and family welfare and was awarded by the Gujarat government for her work. She was also involved with the setting up of Roshni Nilaya School of Social Work.



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Q: About Your student days, what do you remember, what are the things that struck you, and what makes your student days special for you?

FG: Yes, when I applied for admission at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences at Byculla, I was not sure whether I'd get my admission because I did not have any practical experience, but I was a volunteer as a student, as a school student in different organizations...that made me go to the Tata Institute. And at that time Tata Institute was at Byculla, and I was shocked to go to Byculla because it was my first entry in Bombay. I did not study in any other city, I came to Bombay.

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FG: I joined the Tata Institute in the year 1947 and I was the first batch for the two and a half year training course. At that time we felt that was too long for us, but perhaps we were being tried out. And finally it worked out this way that it remains a two year course, so that was one contribution from our batch. From Byculla we had two rooms and we were accommodated. We were thirty in a group and we were doing well. Dr. Kumarappa was the director of the institute and then there were two three other faculty members. In my time came the first beginnings of the department of specialization. One family and child welfare, one medical and psychiatric social work, and third labour. And for a very long time this department of specializations stayed on as such. After a year at Byculla we shifted to Andheri. There we had two nice bungalows with all greenery around and we were very happy, but we were very busy in the classes.

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FG: Our giant professor was Dr. Mehta, Dr. Behram Mehta, who took lot of initiatives in different programmes, field work placements and so on and then we had the specialisation in the next year of our training programme. During that time, the country was in a very bad shape. The conflict between the two countries, Pakistan and India, and it came to a stage when Pakistan and India got separated, that was a very sad shock not only to the students but also to the whole country and eventually to the whole world level. Then we shifted to Andheri and we were in regular classes and all but we were accommodated in only two bungalows and the accommodation was fairly spacious and that was very nice and well coordinated. The library accommodation was quite small, compared to library that you have my God! It's just tremendous. And so we had limited books as such but we made the used of them very well. After that two and a half years of course, I think we have good memories with all of our faculty members. The department of child welfare that was headed by Dr. Banerjee. The department of medical and social work was also headed by Dr. Banerjee; the department of labour was managed by Dr. Murthi and so on.

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FG: We were a happy group and we used to work in different fieldwork agencies and at that time, the fieldwork was for three days a week not two days a week as it is now perhaps, and three days a week. And then in the year 1948, when the country got into troubles there was a very big political division between two countries and our Dr. Mehta, Behram Mehta, he initiated and he wanted the students to be more brave, to be working in the actual social world situations and so he made all arrangement with the trustees of the Tata Institute to go to Delhi. And the whole first batch was, mainly for registration of the refugees and all that other arrangements, it was all over Kurukshetra. And you can imagine, Kurukshetra at that time was absolutely a rural



place and today it has become one of the finest cities in the North. So at that time I was placed in a family camp, and what tragedies, and what tragedies we saw. We couldn't believe it but even then we had to work hard and we had to slowly comfort them. But that comfort was not adequate for them. They were separated from their family members like husbands, fathers, mothers, children and it was a trying experience in a way you know. Anyway at that time, Dr. Mehta's wife, Dr. Mrs. Mehta she was a medical professor, medical person, and she was with me in the camp and I was the student, I was the only student with the family camp and I worked very hard with Dr. Mehta and our campus living was terrible. All over the place, there were rats, and cats and dogs and Oh my God! Even the night to sleep was not at all...but so what, this is nothing compared to the suffering of the refugees, so I think we struggle hard to go through that and we went back to Bombay and to our institute as such.

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FG: But I think our work was extremely appreciated, not only by the trustees, but by the government of India. Because I think this was the only institute that sponsored all these students. The entire expenses were borne by the institute, so the students were not, were not being punished or anything that way and one good thing, that this was considered as our field work experience. Best and we still feel that we gained the confidence about the humanity problems and rehabilitation of the deserted and separated families. Then came the life back to the institute and we were busy with our assignments and this and that and eventually we graduated, as the two and half years guinea pig batch on December 3rd, 1949. And since then, I think all our students of our class have been selected to work as fieldwork supervisors for the institute, and as far as I remember, I think practically every alumni of that batch has worked for years together with the Tata Institute as fieldwork supervisors. And I think this is our

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contribution.

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FG: And this is why, now you can ask me exactly what you want, you want to know about it.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about when you went to Kurukshetra and you were saying that the work was appreciated by the trustees as well as the government, later when Nehru came, he made a speech, were you aware of that he came to the institute in 1952, you were not there...

FG: But we did receive letters from the government of India and I think that should be recorded in our institute record as such and one very sad thing happened also. That we were, we students wanted to attend the Mahatma Gandhi prayers on 30th January 1948 and we went there and as you know Gandhi, he never talked to students or people directly, just the offer of namaste and we were shocked, he was shot dead on that day and then what a chaos, what a chaos, worse than even a war I would say and we were all scattered. But however, we did come back to our center where we were living and we were... that was a memory...as such.

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Q: Could you talk a little more about this experience, from going from Kurukshetra to Mahatma Gandhi this thing, what were your feelings at that time?

FG: Well, we were very happy about it that well we were going to meet Mahatma Gandhi, not meet but to see him. Because most of us had not seen him even, so we were all excited and almost in the front row. You know, and we were, and he was sitting very quietly and the prayers were going on as music on the platform, on the stage. And then the shot came and my, our ears were completely dead in a way. Any



crowd can be a big chaos. I don't even remember very well how we took our bus and came back to our tents. But that was the...

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Q: How did the nation feel with the death of Mahatma Gandhi? You as students, what did you feel?

FG: Well, I think what we felt was complete dead shock. Something that we couldn't think couldn't be ourselves, how we feel about it, but just Oh my God! Oh my God! What has happened? Like that, you know. But I think after about two-three hours little feeling of settlement came that yes, this has happened. Then came the papers and the media and what not. That was that. And two and a half years of this training and fieldwork experience at Kurukshetra, Mahatma Gandhi's prayer meeting, besides all these are our good healthy memories also.

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AM: Can you talk a little more about Professor Behram Mehta. You said that he was a very...

FG: Dynamic giant! I used to call him dynamic giant. Dr. Mehta was never prepared with his lectures. He would come, he would speak, and he would give the best lecture. And lecture, not just only to teach you ABC of social work, No! What is social work, what is action, what is bravery, what are your challenges? You, you there - you don't pay attention in my class. C'mon c'mon, like that he will shout at you also. And once he takes up in his mind to determine that this student social worker is weak he would push, he would be after him, but he would make him a good social worker. That is his contribution. And he was an extremely knowledgeable person; nobody could beat him as such. His field of specialization was sociology, and , not go only by books, he



would create his own knowledge of sociology as such. In the beginning we were afraid of him, but then later we were not, we were also equally strong to fight with him and we did. And that helped us to grow up more, you know.

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FG: And Dr. Mehta initiated a lot in the development of the total social work programme. He was very keen, once he told us that he was going to take the whole group of students to the prostitute area, and he arranged for the bus, everything, and he took us there. And he wanted us to see what's going on in the city, as such. Very unusual type of fieldwork experience he would give us, he would determine to give us. You cannot argue with him too much, but once you argue with him you are a failure, he is the successful one. . And his wife was equally very...but she was very humble compared to Dr. Mehta. And she was also associated with all the students.

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Q: So then you were taken to visit the red light...

FG: Not only red light area but other city slums and everything, how the city is you know, in the night, like that. Yes, it was a shocking thing.

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Q: Could you tell us about the fieldwork, that he gave very unusual...

FG: Yes, he gave us a very unusual fieldwork experience by taking us around in the city to see the slums area, how the people are in the street, and how is the prostitution area. And we were shocked because we were very young and we did not have that much of knowledge of you know how people live in the city, and particularly for me because I was never brought up in a city. I was brought up in a small town, village



like, as such. But this type of experience was given specially by a faculty member like Dr. Mehta. The rest were following a certain pattern of teaching professional social work. He taught professional social work at the root level, I would say. You know, so that we could know what's going on in the field of humanitarian services, as such.

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Q: So how do you think these kinds of experiences, you know Kurukshetra, going to these parts of the city, how do you think they changed you as a student, as a human being, and your attitude towards...?

FG: Yes, I think the first is I would say we become more mature in every aspect of life. Every aspect. And maturity is your strength, it remains with you forever, as such. The more mature you are, the more you are well read also, the more you are well read the more you are contributory also. As practitioners you can be benefited by this kind of experience. It may sound hard or it may sound you know little bit uncomfortable, but then the results are excellent in the development of your own career. And professional development does not mean that you forget your own human self.

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Q: Could you elaborate a bit on that.

FG: I was thinking that it's not only Kurukshetra experience, but the regular fieldwork programme was also quite strenuous. It demanded nearly ten hours of work; it demanded supervision time, both for the faculty as well. The faculty gave us that time, you know. They were available whenever we wanted. So that kind of facility was also there, and that brought more relationships with the faculty and the students, and I think this is most necessary. The closer you are to your faculty members the more you gain, but it depends on the strength of the faculty members. All faculty



members cannot contribute in the same way, but on the whole the Tata Institute has the best faculty members so far. And I hope it will continue that way.

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Q: Could you talk a little you know, about life on the campus, life in the hostel. Did you live in the hostel?

FG: I did not live in the hostel, I did not like it also, and I didn't live on the campus. But we used to go for picnics and different kinds of small amusements and that kind of thing I enjoyed with my group, as such. And we were always very busy, overloaded with work, we were grumbling, but we were dancing also together.

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Q: Is there any other memorable thing you want to share?

FG: Yes, I think right from the beginning Tata Institute faculty members remained in touch with me, right from the beginning, The very next month of the graduation. And I was remained as a fieldwork supervisor for the Tata Institute for almost 25 years. Then I went to Ahmedabad to develop the mental health programme at the BM institute in Ahmedabad. Then I was also given a chance to develop the MSW programme at the Roshni Nilaya, Mangalore. And then I had the chance to attend some international conferences. I remained in contact with the Tata Institute for a fairly ... a very long time. I think it is in the last...my going away to Canada, I think fairly I lost some contact, and otherwise I think the Tata Institute has also not been perhaps to cope up with the alumni, as such. Otherwise I have a good memory of the Tata Institute. And thanks to my very old maternal aunt who pushed me to go to the Tata Institute and she was a Gandhian social worker, so I think I had some roots in my family to take up this career.



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FG: I also took a lot of interest in other developments like adoption, development of family services in the community, and in that case Dr. Bannerji was my faculty who pushed me also and we all worked together. And with the Indian Conference of Social Work in the field of adoption we took the initiative, it took almost 10 years to get that bill passed at the government, as such. So these were in my opinion some good challenges, you know, in life, and that gives you happiness, that gives you lot of contentment, that gives you lot of encouragement to help others like that. I'm still interested if any of the students would like to go further in the development may consult me.

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SG: Ma'am yours was one of the few batches that had that specialization of family and child welfare...

FG: There were only three students in our specialized class. We had a class, we were only three, and I think there were about six or seven in medical and psychiatric social work, and there were about eighteen in the field of labour. And mostly all ladies in the family and child welfare, medical and social work. And after that specialization, whatever you say, all the programmes in Bombay have been initiated by these professional social workers, because they were the first ones to go for jobs. And what was our salary in the beginning? Rupees two hundred and fifty only! All consolidated. Two fifty only. And today the salaries have been increased and everything. So I think our old alumni have contributed a lot in the development of professional services in the field of health, education and welfare.

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FG: My thesis was in connection with the Municipal teachers, Gujarati women municipal teachers in Bombay, and my, if you see their life, my goodness! They were being rejected in their families if they were widows, they were stranded with their children, with their small children, and they were being very much kind of punished by their headmasters and administrators of the municipal. Always men dominated. And that thesis, I read it about two weeks ago after forty years.

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Q: What was the experience of writing that thesis, how do you think it helped you?

FG: Yes, to know the life history of a teacher, women teacher, and Gujarati. And Gujarati was very convenient for me, so I especially took Gujarati women, and hats off that these women worked hard, as such.

Q: You were taking about this male domination; do you also find it in other areas, in the work that you do?

FG: Yes, I specially took up family service work because right from the beginning of my life I feel there's some think wrong in family. Something's wrong. I was not able to understand it properly perhaps, but after the training, after the experience, after more challenges, I think we came to know how more family problems can disturb the whole life. Even till today also, we've seen so many legal cases, and it's just, it is good that there is now women's uplift, and we have come a very long way, but still there is much to do.

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FG: Families are broken down and they are being not helped out, as such.



Q: What do you think is the root of a lot of these family problems?

FG: I would say maladjustments in their own life. On the whole, the way you are brought up, the way you are being pushed, the way you are being dominated. You know all these experiences.

Q: And as a social worker, you know, how do you address these things?

FG: I would say, you know, to our very best we have to develop; we have to work with certain techniques. Case work is one, but it has its limitations, but group work techniques and community techniques could uplift these problems. And good solid awareness and implementation of this awareness. We may be aware of this way, that way, you know, through newspapers and all that, but one has to work very hard for the awareness and then comes the results, you know.

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Q: Is there any other thing you remember about your student life, your relationship with your fellow students, the kinds of things you all did...

FG: We had a very good intimate group, we were just friendly and we were working hard together, we were running together, we were studying together, as such. So I don't think otherwise there are many special experiences as such. We were all the time, the Tata Institute kept us very busy, did not allow us to be free perhaps.

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Q (SG): Whenever we speak to somebody they talk of Dr. Banerjee...

FG: Yes, I think my identification was very close with Dr. Banerjee. She pulled me up very nicely. She gave me a lot of opportunities in my fieldwork, in my class work, in



my other welfare interests, you know, and she took me as a kind of committee member on certain issues, and that's why I think I would say I owe a lot to Dr. Banerjee for my career.

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Q (KPJ): You've seen India kind of evolving from the Independent India, if you look back, you know reflect on it, what would you, how would you've seen the soul of the country, the path that it has taken, in terms of development, in terms of its...

FG: This is a very difficult question but I think India remains divided in many ways. India remains under pressure in all the fields of life. You take up any field, India is working hard. I think it is in the last two months you must have read in the papers what is going on in the country. That's enough to know what has been done for us. So India has to be, first I think do the job honestly, sincerely, and very devotedly. There are many superficialities in our programmes, you know, and some of the superficialities are politically built and partly our own behaviour situations. And we have to take care of ourselves to do a lot for our country, for our neighbors, you know, as such. But we need certain facilities from the government. We have our expectations from the government, and the government has to revise some of their whole programming methods. I think somebody should teach them.

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Q: If you look at social work as a profession, you were there almost at the time of the birth of you know, social work in India, and now almost [FG: Yes, it has grown up. It has grown up]. So how would you look at it...?

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FG: I think social work has progressed. Only at the level of, I would say, government level or at the private level, but now that much of social work strength is not at all enough to fight with all the problems. You can't fight out problems of health, you can't fight problems of education, you can't fight with the problems of welfare. You have got to struggle, and not only social workers, but all the professionals have worked together, along with social workers. I don't think social workers alone can achieve everything, No, social worker has to work with other professionals also, even with industrialists and even with the business people, why not.

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Q: If you were to, you know, say something about TISS in one sentence, what is the first thing that comes to your mind.

FG: Bless the Tata Institute.

Q: Okay, And since now we are celebrating our Platinum Jubilee is there any, you know, message you'd like to give to the students, to all of us who are now presently at Tata Institute.

FG: I think everybody should be brave, honest, well integrated, and have a kind of an ambition to go forward. Whatever our limits are as individuals we should use our strength for everything. That's my message. Bless you all.

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Q (KPJ): You've seen the Tata Institute physically also change. How would you...

FG: Oh my God. As I said I have no words, I just go everywhere and I go, Oh my God! Oh my God! O what a change, what a change, that's all I have. I just don't...I



just feel that way, you know. But tremendous progress. And thanks and thanks to the trustees of the Tata Institute, they have contributed a lot. There have been more facilities in this institute than any other institute, but those you know, Tatas have perhaps always been considering the human life as a whole. Life is precious.

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Q: In what way do you think Tata institute as an educational institution is very different from other educational institutions? Do you think there's something unique about TISS?

FG: Yes, I think other colleges are at a certain level. Tata Institute is at a level where there is kind of humanitarian work, where you are not only trained but you are aware and you are at the development level and you initiate and you work hard and you develop all different kinds of challenges, you like to do. This is what we get perhaps at the professional level. And it's not only social work level, and all professional levels in my opinion are that they build you up to serve others.

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Q: It's a very important point that you made. When you look back on your field work that you did as a student could you talk a little more about what were the settings you were placed in your field work.

FG: Yes. In field work I remember that we were being batched for three days a week, somehow or the other with our batch everything was little more, and that's why we gained more also. And I worked in a Parsi family service agency. At that time all the old...there were all old ladies working in social work, charity workers. Yes, and this is where I initiated that yes, I respect them first, and I work with them together. Then I was also in the child welfare agency where children's lives were terrible. No



opportunities for development and this is where I think the child welfare touched me more. And not the list that I have been the pioneer in some of the child welfare services, and I got the Gujarat government's state family award in 1991... Gujarat state government award in child welfare for the best performance.

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Q: Congratulations.

FG: I left Bombay to go to Ahmedabad with the BM Institute of Mental Health under the Sarabhai's. One of the best institutes pioneered in the field of mental health, next to Bangalore, NIMHANS.

Q: So what kind of services did you um...?

FG: Yes,, we initiated counseling services for parents that was very simple but very effective. We initiated the programme for mentally retarded children, and you won't believe me, it was the first programme in the whole of Gujarat. And now we have about seventy programmers all over Gujarat, so these are the pioneering challenges, but thanks to the BM Institute of Mental Health where Kamalini Sarabhai the psychoanalyst was the leader of the institute. Sorry to say but there has been a lot of breakdown now.

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FG: All the faculty members have not been able to continue. I left BM institute to go to Canada. In Canada I was a senior social worker with the St. Joseph's Hospital, specially selected in the kidney unit, dialysis unit, where I worked with the patients and their families. And I was also a supervisor for MSW students of two-three universities. My head of the department was Mrs. Broch who helped me a lot, who initiated a lot, and who pushed me a lot to go. I left Canada after ten years to come

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back home.

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KPJ: What do you think of the Indian social work? Is there something that is different in the Indian context?

FG: Yes, I think as regards culture, upbringing, the living situations, the entire structure of the country, the city and all is very different from our Indian. And there is a lot of suffering here, there is suffering but then they get out of suffering with our help. Here with our own help also they still remain under the pressure of the culture and traditions and all that. Terribly...terribly. Otherwise I think human beings are the same all over. I interview a foreign client, I interview my own Indian client, I don't see them as two different human beings, but they are both in a different structure and different culture.

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Q: When you say that challenges are more here for social workers...

FG: No, I think challenges are everywhere the same, they are in different shapes or in different contexts, but no, there are many challenges that they also face a lot, and they have to. They have to. There are I would say, financially these agencies are much better than ours. And that is why their contribution to social service as such is better. Better recognized, better practiced, better researched, like that.

Q: Do you think some strength we have which is not there in the west?

FG: Yes, I think there is. The way we suffer, they can't tolerate. Our sufferings are terribly severe and we do not know how...that is why all the time our so called



scientific techniques developed in USA and Canada and other countries may not work here. You have to change, bring about a change or study these techniques, revise these techniques, do some more research work, but this type of contribution I don't think we can afford or we can... We have always dependent on foreign books; it is in the last twenty years that we have more initiated our own literature in social work.

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Q: So would you say that today I mean, whatever you know of social work education is more indigenized as compared to when you were a student.

FG: I won't compare it. I won't compare it, but I think social work education has been more progressive in those countries. Even there is a difference between UK and USA, both are very advanced countries, so what? The literature that you read, American literature that you read, the cases you read, they are far different from our cases. Where are our cases written? Where are our cases published? What have we done for them? We are not contributing to very high professional knowledge, which they are doing.

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FG: Thank you.

Q: Thank you very much. I think you gave us a really wonderful interview and you gave us so much of insight into your experiences.

FG: I hope so. And this is my first time to come to the studio of the Tata Institute...