



## Laxmi Murthy

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Interviewer: Prof. Anjali Monteiro

Camera/Sound: Prof. KP Jayasankar

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She was a Student at TISS 1983-1985. Laxmi Murthy is Consulting Editor with *Himal Southasian*, the region's only political review magazine, published from Kathmandu. She also heads the Hri Institute for Southasian Research and Exchange a research unit under the Himal banner. Laxmi has worked with the International Federation of Journalists, the Women's Feature Service and has written extensively in the mainstream Indian media on issues of development, human rights and gender. She is co-author of the recently published book *Our Pictures, Our Words: A Visual Journey Through the Women's Movement*, Zubaan (2011). Laxmi is one of the national co-ordinators of the Network of Women in Media, India, and has been active in the autonomous women's movement in India for about 25 years. She is currently based in Bangalore, India.

00:00:00,00

Question: We would like to know how you joined TISS and what were your

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initial impressions of campus and the experiences?

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Laxmi Murthy: I wanted to join after I met some people who were far relatives of mine working in Madhya Pradesh at Shahdol, who were working in Vidushak Karkhana. I was quite impressed with what was happening in terms of taking professional training and going out into the world in the rural area which was appealing to me.

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Laxmi Murthy : So that's the reason why I had opted for TISS. I am basically from Pune so my parents were like go and give the test. So I took down some bus numbers, everything from some friends. It was some 90 Ltd bus, I gave my test and next day had to leave from VT. Throughout there was an anxiety about the VT station. I was standing in a line for a ticket for Mumbai to Pune and realized that I had been pick pocketed. I was completely aghast as I did not know anyone there. So I told a station master that maybe you might have come across some same story like this but I have no money for ticket.

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Laxmi Murthy : The ticket cost around Rs 25 that time. The ticket master said he believed me, but he said if you want to restore my faith as a human being you have to come down and pay it back. He said I will definitely get into TISS. I said I want your address what if in case I can't get through I will send it to you. He asked me whether I



had my lunch but I was too exhausted. He took me to railway canteen and helped me out. He was very helping and a sweet person.

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Laxmi Murthy : However I cleared getting into TISS. The first thing I did was to go and give him his money back. For me the most excitement for Post graduation are challenges and living in hostel. TISS has a very nice blend, it's not like you're thrown to the winds especially in a city like Bombay. Once you find your feet it's such a fantastic boost you can deal with anything. I remember some of my class mates used to get a train from Deonar, go up and down to get the excitement in a day or night and during those days hostel rules were not that strict. It was the sense of responsibility that we had in us, we were floored. Then looking around we did complain about the facilities in the hostel but yes, looking at other hostels it was just much better than them.

00:04:53,652

Laxmi Murthy : Though everyone complained about the food I was kind of liking it and that time it was kind of five star hotel for us having single rooms. A very nice space to be. A lovely space to explore friendship, ideas, without any tension of exams, marks that sort. We made many friends, and even later we met often informally. We just met couple of years ago and celebrated twenty five years of our friendship. We kept in touch with others through email and wrote to each other. This was a part of what we had nurtured being in TISS. Especially the hostelites, we also had day scholars who were not a part of hostel but somewhere they felt that they were not a part of it.



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Question: What was your specialization? Could you talk about it?

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Laxmi Murthy : I did URCD. Those days the rural thing was just about starting. Though that time there were not many rural camps but it gave you a chance to be out of city. Help you to do things in semi rural and semi urban areas not just being stuck only in the city. There were lot of attempts to get you out of the vision of what is Bombay, what are slums and all. Even in vacations and term time it really made a huge kind of impression.

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00:07:38,923 --> 00:07:52,573

Laxmi Murthy : There was again lot of questioning on how this kind of programme allows you to question but only beyond a point. So you can question like why is this system doing this to people but you cannot question should this system be changed and really seem like you are helping people. There was a big change in 1984 when Bhopal Gas disaster happened and a whole lot of people were surveying from our batch I could not go as I was down with jaundice and was not supposed to travel.

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00:08:28,411 --> 00:08:50,969

Laxmi Murthy : But I remember it being a very political kind of engagement of



the students and being at a space where you are ready to help but you start questioning. One was also exposed to lot of activists in Bhopal where there were many serious questions to be raised about the pattern of Industrialization and the corporate kind of control of government. All of us were pretty involved that time and the kind of questions what are asked now were the questions which had already been asked by TISS students.

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00:09:13,165 --> 00:09:42,440

Laxmi Murthy : Because it was so obvious at the time of survey, that was the time when they started questioning the framework of the programme itself. Why you stop at a stage and don't encourage any questions? At that time we started a campus group called Shodhini. We had Anand Patwardhan come for the Bhagalpur Blinding film.

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00:10:10,168 --> 00:10:26,773

Laxmi Murthy: There was a lot of discussion on it. We were shown many films. That was a time when women's movement was really on an upswing and we had activists coming and talking to us and going on rallies. I still remember there was kind of discomfort from the side of our faculty that it's all very well discussing this but you can't [indistinct word] during term time. We will be fighting with everyone.

Politically it was a very alive moment in history and us being there, we have seen something so volatile. Every day there was something new to discuss, fight, which was a general political atmosphere.



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00:11:09,440 --> 00:11:35,401

Laxmi Murthy : But in TISS it might have been a little more than other Campuses, maybe because of living there, maybe because you are learning all these things. I felt a lot of churning in campus. Lots of it productive, some of it not so much.

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00:11:46,807 --> 00:11:54,251

Question: What about the field work? What were your experiences and perceptions?

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00:11:54,251 --> 00:12:12,323

Laxmi Murthy : I remember it very well and what surprises me now is that we were doing field work at work at SPARC. We had people like Sheela Patel, Padma and many people there. When I look back now I feel like actually we did not get much out of it as much as we could have, partly because of managerial issues of students coming. It actually was a lot of work to deal with students and interns and I do not think a lot of organizations at that time put in that kind of effort, they probably did not have enough people to do that.

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00:12:46,015 --> 00:12:58,485



Laxmi Murthy : So we have spent a lot of time hanging around so it was up to you, if you have absorbed anything and if you took an initiative but most of the time you felt that you were a little bit of a nuisance. Doing a lot of hanging around there and doing some nitty gritty mundane task but in terms of actually absorbing anything which now I look at SPARC and the work which it's known for doing.

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00:13:15,893 --> 00:13:39,889

Laxmi Murthy : We were like almost there for a year and what did we do there? So partly our fault and partly I think there wasn't any good system of induction, putting field work students to work in a particular thing, or give them a particular project where you are working with a full time staff so you can see something which you feel like you have done. So this is what I remember about the field work that it didn't seem like we have absorbed as much as we could have.

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00:14:05,250 --> 00:14:14,525

Laxmi Murthy : Out of town trips were a different story because it was with different people and the NGOS or the activists group like with Kashtakari Sanghatna we went to Karjat. Into Darshan Shankar's place and somewhere into Gujarat so over there the local people would take you and I remember those days being very insightful.

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00:14:34,685 --> 00:14:51,608

Laxmi Murthy : The group experience of going there and even being with the group from there that was really useful. The other field work was some community development thing. It was totally up to us if you learn something great and if not, you could still get by and the sort of irony was you did pretty well in the field work which would end up making you more cynical.

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00:15:08,767 --> 00:15:26,973

Laxmi Murthy : If you are actually flunked or something you say now I have to pull up my socks but you do some kind of mediocre thing and then you get good marks and wonder why you have been straining yourself if you are just going to get through. I remember it being an experience of lots of students from my batch where it was like you feel a wasted opportunity, that there is lot of possibility and it was not tapped.

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00:15:45,285 --> 00:15:50,766

Question: What about the programme itself, the courses available?

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00:15:50,766 --> 00:16:22,410

Laxmi Murthy : I think we had some great teachers. It was patchy, I would not say



it was formally great but I think the key word was opportunity to access information like in the library, or during seminars, everything was open to you, if you put in effort you could get what you wanted.

I don't think the faculty was very demanding which is in a way a problem. The faculty were very nice people which in another way is a little unfair for students in a long run as they were not pushing you. You could get by by not doing very much, but again it was up to you.

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00:17:02,805 --> 00:17:15,951

Laxmi Murthy : I remember many of our staff members who lived on campus would invite us for tea and have long discussions about some book they were reading or we were reading. We had study circles and that was a really big part of the curriculum but I remember those days being really valuable and we could spend more time with those we wanted to get the extra input. But the actual classes were not very challenging as one would imagine given that kind of faculty, or the assignments were not very challenging, you could do it while also whiling away your time.

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00:17:50,451 --> 00:18:17,173

Laxmi Murthy : Actually there is a lot of problem with a lot of Post Graduate courses here as compared to a lot of people who say that who have gone to US, 'Hum to



*pees gaye* because we really had to work hard,' and in here you can get by not doing very much. It's quite a pity because you look at the caliber of many faculty members and again I feel it was really quite a waste.

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00:18:28,800 --> 00:18:49,886

Laxmi Murthy : But I remember in 1990 when the Mandal things were going on, we were reading about it and we got a copy of the Mandal Report and I saw Prof. Hebsur. I was like, my god, Prof Hebsur taught us in TISS and then I remember what all we did in our classes and I thought what a waste. He was even working on the event then and did not know what kind of idiots we were.

62

00:19:01,286 --> 00:19:11,399

Question: What about life on campus, since you have lived in the hostel? Do you have any funny memories?

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00:19:11,399 --> 00:19:37,530

Laxmi Murthy : Probably they are all censored memories. Not meant for the public, but as I said we had such lovely friends there, most of our close friendships were forged over there. We managed to keep in touch. It was very comfortable compared to other hostels, the food was great. There were few people, there were four seaters and single seaters,



now it is two seaters. I do not know how people manage. But it was a very very alive kind of campus and atmosphere. There were wardens but they were not breathing down your neck.

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00:20:08,771 --> 00:20:39,850

Laxmi Murthy : I think the attitude was like students would be students as long as nothing too untoward happens it's okay. A few kind of strikes I personally found ridiculous and I did not take part in it and many of us didn't as many of us felt that the things and campus was very well equipped.

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00:20:39,850 --> 00:20:58,896

Laxmi Murthy : The hostels and all was very well kept, with things that you even find at your home, but after some time all of a sudden you have strikes saying we want water 24 hrs or some or the other things. There would be some massive signature campaigns and all that. Even we felt that given a course in a social work it may be better to do all sort of activism for something other than yourself and why do you want water 24 hrs anyway like water comes at said times is more than enough.

68

00:21:31,929 --> 00:21:53,611

Laxmi Murthy : That we used to call a kind of bad blood especially between PM



students who were perceived as self-centered and social work students were thought of as virtuous and sacrificing but otherwise campus life was really quite nice.

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00:21:53,611 --> 00:22:26,651

Laxmi Murthy : I do not know which still exists. There was not any kind of policing at the time we were there. It was really relaxed, with the belief that everyone is a responsible kind of adult

71

00:22:42,491 --> 00:23:06,562

Laxmi Murthy: After I left TISS I joined a research job in Bombay and side by side I was an activist in women's movement for a year. I left the research center and worked as full time in women's center. After that I kind of decided never to take a job in activism. Never to work in NGO, never to be paid for political kind of activity and broadly I managed to do other kind of consultancies or assignments to support myself because I believed that professionalism and activism do not go together.

Laxmi Murthy : Somewhere I believe in a larger kind of trend of things, because funded activities have their place.

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00:24:01,405 --> 00:24:29,971



Laxmi Murthy: I did not think political activities was a place for that so I think my training in TISS made me very sure because I have seen the insights of professional NGO's as well professionalism of women's movement, very closely and I decided to continue with it.

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00:24:47,933 --> 00:25:17,494

Laxmi Murthy: Politically an act being funded is definitely a contradiction. I think there is a lot of sharpness in my training, and it has given me, ironically enough, but it has given an edge to look beyond what appears to be on a face of it. And I think that ability is definitely a part of it so even my writing getting into journalism was a very conscious kind of choice of being in way on the other side of activism, you being an observer of a political activity but with a certain empathy or sympathy and that's again a very clear difference. So that has helped me to be conscious of the margins and either you take a stand on that edge or balance which itself gives you a very different perspective.

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00:26:25,720 --> 00:26:44,970

Laxmi Murthy: So that's why I have felt I am outside of activism, out of journalism and a whole lot of things. Whereas, people have always been rooted in a particular way. I see a lot of my journalist friends, where something would be so obvious to me, and my friends would be like what are you talking about, kind of thing.



Look at lot of sponsored junket things which they may take you to do articles on reproductive health but that criticality, that ability to be critical even to someone who is paying your fare, as I remember one of the trips was sponsored by UN. It was quite horrifying what was going on in the name of reproductive health and a completely donor driven thing where everyone was telling us that if they didn't do something they would get what services they have to offer.

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00:27:35,970 --> 00:27:56,276

Laxmi Murthy: As we were going back in a jeep somewhere near Haryana, we were talking to people there they said yes its true, but I hope you are not going to write about it. I said do you even know what you are saying you are talking to a bunch of journalists and telling us not to write.

So she says it's unethical to write against it if we have paid for your fare. So then we had to go back, but my article was not published, but that was a different story.

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00:28:13,651 --> 00:28:28,134

Laxmi Murthy: The fact that if I was a journalist who had no clue what I was talking about for them it seemed to be perfectly a fair and square deal – someone's taking you there and you are doing a PR job.



Q: The world of activism, journalism, professional researcher, how would you look back for professional social work? What do you think are the gaps? What do you think are the directions?

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00:29:01,277 --> 00:29:24,933

Laxmi Murthy: I think the time I was there it was very very different from now and it had become more critical probably now from the 1980's which were the pre-liberalization days and pre CSR and all of this coming now and this is where most of the social work students get their bread and butter.

88

00:29:24,933 --> 00:29:44,137

Laxmi Murthy: As long as it's seeing what it is, it's fine. Hypocrisy or any kind of pretension is definitely a problem and I think NGO sector is growing and has grown way beyond what it was when we were there in 1980's.

I don't think a lot of even my classmates or even people who would think like me are actually employed in NGOs where is now past few batches I have met from TISS they fit in very well in NGOs.

Where it has been a growing sector and a sector catering to certain needs and then these people are very well trained to fit those needs and if they are all very clear then I guess there is no quarrel for any of that.



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00:30:18,924 --&gt; 00:30:36,614

Laxmi Murthy: But the problem lies where this sector is setting up to do something that it cannot. There is also a lot of fuzziness not to do with TISS or not to do with social work . There is a lot of fuzziness which constitutes actually interventions which would lead to social justice or for betterment of people lives I think there is lot of fuzziness there for very deliberate people.

93

00:31:00,769 --&gt; 00:31:37,320

Laxmi Murthy: I don't know how much of that is a part of questioning or a part of criticality that you are trained into and the kind of the training. We were given a training as a form of curriculum as well as what you imbibe just being a part of that whole kind of group would make you unfit.

The contradictions are also getting very sharp so I don't know how I could reconcile all of that at least in the 1980's when all of us were being trained there was some sort of discomfort but now if we look at the contradiction it's very clear. I think looking at the world now which we are a part of and the kind of training we got is a big mis-match.

101

00:34:09,117 --&gt; 00:34:26,804

Question: Would you like to say something back to TISS?



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00:34:26,804 --> 00:34:50,841

Laxmi Murthy: I think I can just reiterate what TISS has given to me and still remember lots of friends, they question and I think if you are able to question without undergoing a complete breakdown or something that's the most valuable gift that education can give you.