



Prof. K.P. Jayasankar

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Prof. K.P. Jayasankar is Chair, Centre for Critical Media Praxis, School of Media and Cultural Studies. He joined TISS on a project in 1986 and as a faculty member in 1988. He is involved in media production, teaching and research. His films, jointly directed with Dr. Anjali Monteiro, have won twenty-eight national and international awards. Dr. Jayasankar is also an award winning cameraperson and editor and enjoys web and graphic design. Vibgyor Film Festival, Kerala and Bangalore Film Society organised a retrospective of his work in 2006. He was a Howard Thomas Memorial Fellow in Media Studies, attached to Goldsmith's College, London and a DAAD visiting scholar at the University of Heidelberg. He has also served as jury to film festivals.



Q: Well, we wanted to know from you as well how is it that you came to TISS. You came almost 25 years back. How did you get through and just the beginning of your introduction.

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J: It's a very long story. I have always passed by here when I went to Poona. I have all seen this green space. Never bothered to come in here. And of course, obviously I had heard about this place. There was also people from IIT where I was studying would come here for their social sciences research and consulting library. So, that's my first kind of introduction to this institute. But I had never come here before.

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How I really actually came to be employed here is a very strange and a long story. I was doing my PhD at the humanities and the social sciences department in IIT and I used to be very interested in the visual medium and films and stuff like that for many years. So I used to hang around in the Industrial Design Centre. I had lot of friends there and also faculty members who've been my friends. So, Anjali was for the first time doing, she was doing her first film, it's called Paani Panchayat. She happened to be editing there and so I kind of got to know of her and she asked me, I just asked her, "Can I come and observe what you doing?" Because I never knew anything about editing.

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So, she said yes. Then we used to kind of edit late in the.. early in the morning around 4 or 5 and no student was working. And I knew nothing about film making. The film was already shot. So, then I started kind of helping her with the edit. In fact I did the animation of the title sequence, though I have never done any animation, just the audacity of the uninitiated. Then I helped her do the soundtrack. Not because I had any... it's more out of interest. That's how I first started working on a film.



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And then she said there is a project here, if I am interested, can come and work here. So, that's how I... that too, a film on child labour and she said if you're interested you can take up the job. So, I never made a film but I said yes and that's how I came here. That was 1986 and I kind of stayed on.

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Q: So, you basically came in when the golden jubilee was happening and...Platinum jubilee now. So I mean, 25 years you've been here so growing individually as a film maker and a teacher... Will you tell us how the institute was in those days with a smaller number? I mean, what are your memories of the institute, of the space, in terms of people?

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J: When I came here for the first time, what struck me was the size. It was very tiny and cosy, and very few people, and everybody knew each other. So, it kind of reminded me of a one department in IIT where I was student in Bombay University. That's how it felt like to be because there were about less than 100 faculty here and the students were very few. I think in those days basically there was only social work and personal management and not even health and hospital administration. In social work, there were about 5 specializations and I think the number of students here were about 80 every year, less than 80 and that made it about 160 students.

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So, you knew each student. So, that was my first impression and the greenery here and even the buildings look very tiny to me compared to other institutions that I have been to and very chic and beautiful rather than just huge PWD buildings elsewhere that I have seen. So, that's my first impression of the space. As an institution, I think, for me its been a tremendous space for growth because I came here as I said, I have never even dreamt of becoming, obviously I



have dreamt of becoming a film maker but I never thought that I would do this thing in my life.

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So, for me to be able to kind of learn how to make films, at the same time make them and also kind of use most of my other interests like interest in social science, or research and teaching. They all, I mean, the institute made it possible to be all brought together. And this was something that I enjoyed tremendously. And I think, if I have to do it again, I would do the same thing all over again. I have no regrets about it and it's been an extremely interesting and enriching experience for me.

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And, the, about the institution as I said earlier, it has been a... it was a very... I knew almost everybody here within a month or so got to know everybody and that as I said was the year of the golden jubilee. I mean, I think, I joined few days before there was this big do here with Rajiv Gandhi and I remember coming here just a few days before and there were tremendous security here, rooms, and it was held in this quadrangle. So they closed all the rooms around here. We were, I was in this unit called Audio Visual Unit which is near the research methodology of today. It was a tiny room and all the rooms were sealed.

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So, Anjali told me, don't come on that day because you are not a bonafide employee as yet so and you might have some difficulty and I of course was not very fond of these big crowds and these ceremonies. So I stayed away on that day when Rajiv Gandhi was here. But otherwise that is my first year of birth here. If I look back what is of great interest. I have taught elsewhere before coming here but not on this scale. But why one kind of really enjoys this while interacting with the students here, it's, I mean the kind of spirit of inquiry, spirit of freedom, the critical spirit, all that the students brought to the classroom has been very



interesting. And to be able work with the small group who otherwise you had to kind of instil in them a sense of social commitment or spirit of working with communities which was kind of taken for granted.

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So many of the things that one had to do elsewhere was always here, present with the students. And if I look back at the great wealth that... accumulated in one's life is that large body of students. I can safely say I must have taught about here and elsewhere about 4 or 5 thousand students which is quite a large wealth. I don't think I can dream of having accumulated this kind of wealth in my lifetime. And that's something I cherish. And it's... I mean, not only it's, I mean, I always thought that I am teaching someone but for me each of these encounters has been a experience of learning something new.

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And, to a great extent working with young people has always meant newer challenges and also had to kind of think a little younger than what you are and made it possible to be humble, and also kind of keep oneself sufficiently open ended to kind of new experience. So that's how I see myself.

Q: You said that the Audio Visual Unit used to be in one small room of the corridor and I mean you came in also in the 80's, so we just wanted to know, in the 80's the Audio Visual Unit, what was the purpose of a unit like this in a place like TISS which is concentrating on social work and social services?

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J: I think it is something very visionary that, I think, the credit entirely goes to Prof. Gore and Prof. Vijay Tendulkar. See, we were living in a particular context in those days, I am talking about, when it was started it was probably in 1978. It was an era where there were very little

visual, the presence of visual medium in public life and people's life. The only access to visual medium probably was the cinema, the mainstream cinema and cinema in general. And also radio and to some extent television. But, I don't think, I wouldn't say that it was an even big presence in one's life in the 70's because I remember the first television appearing in India around that time.

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And I think the colour television appeared in the 80's. I think the first television that I saw was during the Asian Games that was in 1982 and it was a big thing and people went in to other people's houses to watch colour T.V. But, so that is the context in which the Unit comes into being and people's association with the, with, when you talk about visual medium that it is something for entertainment and is to be taken in small quantity. It was something that was not always essential in, it was not something that was thought of essential for one's, essential part of one's life. Today of course, it's so ubiquitous that you can't think of even one for the world or one's identity without very strong references to the idea of the mediated world that we live in.

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So, if you were to look at that time to have an audio visual unit in an institute of social work or social sciences, it was something that was very radical and I think if you were to look at the wisdom of having done this is tremendous. And I don't think (without blowing one's own trumpet), one could say safely say that the kind of work that the Centre does today is something unique may not be large scale in its kind of scope but what it does is very unique and those seeds were sown in the 70's. And I give that credit to Prof. Gore and then of course, it was followed up by somebody like Dr. Armaity Desai who was a tremendous source of support for the unit.

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She saw to it that we got a larger space because I think we moved to this new space, of course which is not much tinier than what you see today. Somewhere around I think this space was built, the studio that we are sitting here was built in 1996 or 5. So she is the one who kind of had this vision to kind of have this larger space of a studio because when I joined the Centre, (it was called a unit), we had two VHS cameras and a monitor, 27 inch television monitor which was on a trolley which used to be taken to classroom, they had wheels on it, so you pushed it to the, whichever classroom you had to screen a film and then you would roll it and take it back to the unit.

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It was a mobile unit and it could move around in this quadrangle. It couldn't go anywhere else. So that was the situation when I came here and from that to today, I mean, it's been, a tremendous growth. And it's been a I mean when one looks back it fills you with a sense of... at the same time as well as of.... yeah it's kind of amazing that how the unit has grown from those days to what it is today.

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Q: I mean, I wanted you to speak little bit about what role was this unit playing in the 80's in college and then how as the unit in all its avatars constantly adapted and responded and added to its responsibilities of being a certain entity in a place like TISS. I mean it grew into a Centre after so many years. But it also responded to certain requirements, responded to certain needs of society, of the institute. So, how is that purpose sort of gradually changed?

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J: Yeah, in the beginning when the unit was established, its role was rather limited. The role of the unit was to kind of cater to the audio visual requirements of the institution which meant

that you had to do screen whatever films that were required but I would say they were not very large. I mean people didn't use films as much as they do today. Because it was, there was no, very little technology and people would rather stick, even with no computers around obviously, so people they would, its more chalk and board kind of classroom experience. One of the things that we were doing is to kind of screen films whenever they required.

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Do some amount of documentation of whatever happened in the institution. It could be covering an event and mainly those were also done using still photography. There were resource units. One was the library and then later came the computer centre or it was in those days called electronic data processing unit. They used to have these cards which they kind of punched and its huge contraptions would kind of read that data. And their computing capacity would be probably less than a mobile phone today. That's what the kind of speed of things were.

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So, we were one of those resource units. What we were expected to do was to kind of service the audio visual requirements of the institution with whatever limited resources that we had.

Q: And also like how it is today and, I mean, that shift, of the Centre. And now where is the Centre, because from being a research unit, it has become a Centre of teaching, of learning. A lot of other things apart from documentation, so how did that change come along?

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J: I think the first leap came when there was only one or two faculty members here. I joined in 1986 and Anjali was already here and both of us, to some extent, brought some academic kind of inputs into the Centre, into the unit at that time because, slowly began to move away because of largely by sheer accident of our presence because as you know we were not

trained film makers so we were basically academics who're trained into doing this kind of work.

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So, when we came in, I think we brought in our own academic interest in that way into the Centre and began to do whatever work that one was doing elsewhere, here as well. So it began to take on a little more of an academic kind of bent. And the first I think the major leap came when we were asked to teach a course, a basic course, I remember it's called something that had the word, audio-visual, basic approaches to communications or something like that and it was a course that we started teaching in 1991 to all the students of social work.

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So there were about 100 students and that's how we, probably, got to know many of the students of those years and it was a basic that everybody had to do. One realized that it was a very enjoyable situation where you taught about particular media practice to a group of students who were extremely responsive. And even today when we meet the students, when we meet them after all those years, they talk about the kind of interaction that we've had. So that was the first time ever that the unit was beginning to kind of make itself or be, it was the first time the unit was being seen as a something of a teaching presence within the institution and then onwards the course had taken on quite a significant role in the... and the school feedback has been extremely favourable and people began to kind of appreciate the fact that the audio visual component on this programme is... has some kind of relevance in your life.

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Because I think the basic question that is, the visual medium, the image is one of the central resources, how we construct our own identity and how we look at the world. And this very little education when it comes to the ability for one to read critically the image because we are taught to read and do arithmetic but never to kind of interact critically with the visual.

And bringing that element into the classroom, I think was an interesting experience both for us as teachers and for the students..

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And then probably the, slowly the kind of technology, I mean earlier there was only these VHS cameras, and very limited, no editing kind of set up. So, what we would do was shoot the films here, and then would take the footage to the Film City and they had a Umatic editing set up. And then we would transfer the entire stuff from VHS to Umatic tapes and begin to edit. So, it was a quite a, herculean kind of task, first we had to in real time transfer all the stuff and technology was, I mean the Umatic tapes and the hire of editing was quite an expensive proposition compared to today.

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And, so one had to do it very quickly, because the clock started ticking when you went there. So that's how we kind of began producing more and more films and they have from those days from the 90's started getting recognition in the wider world. So the Centre began to be seen as capable of producing films which was appreciated and recognized in the wider world. So, that's the second kind of growth spurt in the history of the Centre. And of course then we were given a bigger mandate in the late 90's, we are asked to set up the studio and also before in that I think the late 80's we got this Umatic editing equipment which we still have.

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And that's like a what should I say, a great moment in our life. It was possible for us to shoot in a format that was professional and broadcast quality and then edit it right here which was I mean, as I said the first time where we used to edit, go to Film City, transfer all the stuff to Umatic and then edit it which was very expensive. The second kind of major technological leap so to speak was when somebody in Bangalore set up an editing set up, where the one side of the machine was a VHS machine and other side was a Umatic machine.

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So, you could use the control and actually edit without transferring. So you put in the VHS tape, and then took a three point edit and it would edit all into the Umatic, which was a, which kind of also meant that you didn't have to, spend a lot of time transferring this material onto Umatic, and also it also avoided generation loss. When you went from one analog tape to the other, it lost a lot of information. So, that was a second and third when we had our own shooting and equipment here, it was like having reached the, it was a cloud nine experience.

0:22:21.521 We were overjoyed that we could do it right here. And that also kind of then our production started becoming more and more frequent and became more, I think we were able to produce material that was broadcast quality for the first time.

Q: You spoke about the students, interactions with students. You and Anjali mam are probably the only two professors in college who teams together and I mean that's a new experience for students who've come in. So, what has been, I mean, how did you decide upon wanting to teach together, secondly, how did the students respond to the both of you, or yeah another classroom anecdotes.

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J: Yeah, so, I think, as I said started working from the 1986 onwards. Obviously we were not married and we were very good friends and we would kind of spend a lot of time talking about this passion about film making and we brought very different kind of faculties on to, because I came from a, I mean, even today I mean, I studied painting and I would think of myself as an author in that sense and I had lot of interest in the arts so, I was not very much committed to the idea of the user or... I would see myself as would kind of be very aggressively against the very instrumental notion of the art. Because even in those days when one painted one would kind of say that one is not really interested in what people did with it.

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So, I had that kind of a background, though of course, had, I mean was involved in politics before that because I was in the college in the 70's so it was a very exciting experience. So I bring that kind of... and Anjali came from a more, she had studied Economics and she brought... and also has worked a lot with communities in general but I didn't have that kind of community based experience. So we had, we were kind of different beings, we were totally different at least to start it with different kinds of experience on to the table.

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And so, we began to kind of also probably influence each other in terms of, and we kind of reached a point where both of us kind of gained out of that experience. And then we were to marry much later. That was a different story. So, but and when we started working so we used to spend tremendous amount of time together during these edits and shoots. The first time the course was started we already married. So, and the sheer fact that we spent almost 24x7/365 days together, had some sense great rapport and respect for each other which is something that is, and we know each other's competencies, we know each other's strengths, we know each other's weaknesses and also the mutual respect that we... so many of our friends called us the Siamese Twins because we are all the time together.

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So, then obviously we had started teaching, we started teaching together. In the beginning it was like, students would complain that both of them speak at the same time and it was like a stereophonic kind of an effect, one is standing this side... we don't know what to kind of.... whom to listen to but today I think because one has done it for about over 25 years you know that I know, what is she going to say at this moment not because it is rehearsed, but I know that how she is going to respond to certain questions.

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It's also very reassuring to have two people because then you don't have this onus of carrying the great ideas, the burden of carrying great ideas. You are only a facilitator. And your role as a teacher is diminished much less because it's not that you are a great teacher standing there giving your gyan but it's more like an experience of dialogue, sharing and obviously nobody has the answers to anything, everything in the world. So, it's also a support- where I don't have an answer, she might have or she doesn't have an answer, I might have an answer.

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That's how we... and then I don't know what students responded to us. Probably they thought it's a very strange thing to do, to have two teachers in the class but I think many of them, at least whatever little I know students spoke about, because they do speak to us about it much later. Not then when you are a teacher because there is a relationship of distance with the teacher. They've always thought that it was a interesting period because it also kind of.... in some sense how two people can collaborate in teaching. Many of them, of course, many people say that people who are married cannot work together at all which is something people find very amusing and strange. Because we begin to spend so much time together with each other, you begin to have conflicts and stuff like that... while feeling restricted.

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But I think, in our case, it's like as I say, one is the left brain and one is the right brain and we kind of take every decision, every little thing that we do jointly. And even when we write, we write together. We literally sit on the keyboard and write together, so which is something that has become more of a habit. I am not making a virtue of it but it's kind of a habit of certain amount of dependence on each other and certain amount of feeling that we could carry together.

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And, as I said, I would repeat that again, the fact that you begin to think of teaching or, I mean it changed the classroom. It became more like a discussion and just because two people are present. Otherwise you know there is this one to one and you give a lecture but it kind of very structurally changed that dynamics. There are two of us and I would like to have more people in the class. So, probably also the gender difference. There was a man and a woman speaking not one man speaking. And obviously there is a way in which those gender roles took on. Yeah! I don't know how people responded to it because they would sometimes make fun of the fact that two of us are there and stuff like that.

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So, I guess, I think it was a, for me it was a tremendous experience and I feel kind of, both us feel kind of the feeling of the wholeness when both of us are there and being able to wriggle out of situation to which one doesn't have an answer to same, so you looked upon the other which I think is a...

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Q: The Centre what it is today, you know, the Centre on the verge of becoming a school, having so many students who are getting trained and going out in the industry. Its also in a sense your baby, you've been here for so long, you've seen it grow, you've envisioned a future for it and then you are working towards it. So, if I were to ask you in a lighter, more emotional note may be, How do you connect to the Centre?

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J: Yeah! It's been a collective effort but I think what we've been able to do was to build a good team and fortunate for us was to have this team which kind of carried the work through. But what I cherish and appreciate greatly in this, I don't think I would have been able to do

this any other institution because it's a unique institution in many ways. And it gave us freedom to kind of dream differently. They were not big dreams but whatever one dreamt of, I don't I have ever thought, that, O Gosh, I need to do this but I cannot do it in this institution because the intellectual kind of climate in the institution has always been very forward looking, very radical and it kind of appreciated the fact of that you could think differently.

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There have been moments where has been less money available to do things but that has never been, in fact, that has been a great asset for many of us because as film makers I know for one thing, is that, whatever it were that one is doing, we work but lot more inventiveness and improvise, jugaad, the kind of being able to kind of being able to deal with situations of difficulty and with little resources and also demystify the role of the equipment, or the financial resources or technology but to look upon it as a challenge.

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That's something that the institution always provided. But in terms of the Centre growing, I think, it always allowed, so I would kind of think of some of the important figures if we have to look at... Prof. Armaity Desai actually plays a very crucial role. She probably recognized, and it's kind of a visionary, I mean that's where great wisdom comes from that she probably... those days when one started working here, one never thought the kind of great leaps communication or the whole mediated world is going to take in the years to come. One never thought that this is going to be possible at all.

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But to be able to dream and you know this is going to be an important space, an important resource for the institution as a whole, is something that she kind of dreamt of. That's been a great.... she has been a great source of support and a great beacon for the Centre. And then obviously all the directors down the line have kind of supported us. But I think one of the

major..... The next point in which we grew very big was when Prof. Parasuraman came and who probably first with the restructuring of the institution gave us the hope that we can now think differently, think big. Think of not us as a resource unit which kind of supported other activities but a unit in its own right.

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So, that's how the Centre for Media and Cultural Studies comes into being. And in fact, it is actually, though the nomenclature change, we continued to do what we had been doing for many years, except for that we have an M.A. programme which we started. So, for us, why this, ... I mean going back to the question, I think, what made us possible to do this because of the atmosphere in the institute and the kind of freedom and autonomy and intellectual freedom that it afforded, all of here, not only us, to kind of think differently and conceptualize whatever we needed to do the way we do.

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So that's how I see the growth of the Centre and to be able to have built up in rather a short period of time what we, what the Centre has done. I think is largely due to the people who worked here and largely due to the kind of team work that we have all kind of and also now to the kind of students that we've had. They have also contributed tremendously. Also kind of kept us on our toes. Also, kind of reinvent ourselves each point and reflect on what we do not have. I mean, I don't think we are perfect, but, what is unique about the Centre is its ability to self-reflexively look at and gaze and see what it lacks.

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And to also to kind of look at it, to kind of work on its strengths, to also realise its weaknesses. So that's how I see the Centre.

Q: *Any anecdotes?*

JS: I mean, yeah, there are anecdotes in the sense that, there are some interesting that I have. One is... the campus is being greened by, I mean, the greenery in the campus is because of... this person, a faculty member called Prof. Panakkal and when I came here... he would always come and visit me in the Centre and in the course of my... and he was a Malayali, so that's another bond, ethnic bond that we forged and he came from the same town as I came but later in my conversation I realized that we went to the same school and same college. I mean, I first discovered that we went to the same college and then some years later we also discovered we also went to the same school. And he also used to say, he came here and married somebody who was a faculty member here.

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So there was a lot of interesting comparison. Of course, the comparisons stopped there, but he was a person who actually brought all these trees and he had a one story to tell about each tree. When I asked him about this tree, he would say that there is a fishtail palm here which was brought from Malaysia or the Jackfruit was brought from Kerala, and he would tell me a story. He would visit us everyday in the Centre because the unit was next to the research methodology and there was a tea shop next to it. It was not a tea shop. There was a table and there was this amazingly interesting critic of social work called Swami who used to sell tea there and the entire institute kind of landed up there.

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Of course, it was an interesting digression from work because everybody whom you knew would also drop in to say hi and have their tea in peace on that table and Prof. Panakkal also used to come regularly to have his cup of tea in the morning and in the afternoon and we would have this long conversation. Swami was an interesting figure. He was rather a short tempered person. He still comes. I don't know whether you've met him ever and he was a very upright and self-righteous man and no-nonsense. If we ever picked up a fight with him,

he would then go into a tirade against the duplicity of social work, social workers, and how people say one thing and preach something else. That was an interesting... and he still comes and whenever he comes, he comes and meets me, because we were just next to him.

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He was also very... one had to have this coupon, these green coupons, I don't know whether you have seen them which was about 25 paisa, 50 paisa, something like that which you had to give him. He would rather have that coupon to be given to him when you collect a cup of tea. So, on many occasions, I think, he has given me credit and we give him the coupon later, which was, I think a big thing to... It's a lot to say about Swami because he was a stickler.

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Students wise, I think, as I said, there are many. So, wherever you go, anywhere in the part of the world, you find some student or the other where, you know, would, kind of, look you up. In fact one of the most interesting experiences that we had when we were once travelling in the US and we had stopped the car on the way and its middle of nowhere and we saw a coffee shop and we were just planning to get a cup of coffee. And there was somebody who came running from a distance saying, ma'am, ma'am... and we looked around and this girl we had taught in the 90's and she lives somewhere in San Francisco and she was just driving past and she saw us and she was all literally tears in her eyes.

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Now what one says is that, I mean the kind of students that you have created world over, is something that is invaluable and of course, we've had also the good fortune of having taught students not only in this institute, and probably we taught in many other institutions and where ever we went, of course, we carried this beacon of Tata institute and the moment you said you are from TISS, people would look at you with a little bit of more respect than we

deserved and that also helped us kind of extend our work, the Unit, the Centre and the institute.

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So, and also it gave us more opportunities to interact with very many other students.

Q: Something about the fact that you still live in the campus...

J: Yeah, That is, from 1987 onwards. From then onwards, Anjali always had a quarter here. I think she got a quarter in 1986 if I am not mistaken; she got a quarter in 1987. We got married in 1989. So since '89 I have been living on campus and it was a very small community of people here. Even today I would say it's a smaller community than compared to many other institutions. But, when we came to live here, there were very few families living here. There was that building in front which has duplex buildings and these... two tall buildings which were the faculty quarters.

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And then there were a few small bungalow like structures behind where the... even today, where the administrative staff lived. And people used to refer to the, people like newspaperwala and all that, would ask, "Do you live in the chawl (which is the duplex buildings) or in the building?" Because they were thought of as the chawl. Though senior people actually lived in those structures! So, when we were staying, I think, it was a very small community. We used to have get togethers regularly and there was a Day Care Centre right at the ground floor which of course even today it is there.

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And there were a lot more interactions among the faculty. We would have these so called fairs and some community events where people cooked and brought their food and all. So that was very interesting and since we lived on campus, we were more friendly and of course we were



much younger. So I think many students... they would drop in at home. It was also to some extent a nuisance because anybody wanted a VCR, you would get a knock on your door say Sunday afternoon. We were very few resources available so, Sunday afternoon, somebody would come and say I want a particular VHS tape or but I think it was a very interesting experience because being able to interact with a lot of students, it was nice.

0:43:51.884

Q: Towards the end, wanted to ask you, because we've have been asking everyone else, in 75 years of the institute, you've been here almost more than two decades and there is a future, How would you like TISS to be, how do you envision, what values, something that you would like to say to TISS ...

J: I think it's a great institution and it is very unique in its... and I think many other institutions in this country, when they grow up they would like to be like TISS. It's an amazing place where intellectual freedom is valued and it's a great institution because it goes beyond the idea of an academic institution and it also has commitment to educate in true sense of the term that goes beyond markets which makes it very relevant because when education becomes more and more market oriented, profession oriented, vocation oriented, it's a kind of small oasis that kind of keeps high the idea that education goes beyond the idea of markets.

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So, I would think most institutions in this country, I hope, educational institutions would grow up to become TISS. So that's how I see this institute.