



## **Prof. Suma Chitnis**

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Interviewer: Prof. Anjali Monteiro

Camera/Sound: Prof K.P. Jayasankar

Place: Breach Candy, Mumbai

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Prof. Suma Chitnis is a former vice chancellor of SNDT University, Mumbai and former executive director of the Tata Endowment for the Education of Indians. She was a faculty member at TISS between 1970 and 1993, and was Professor and Head, Unit for Sociology of Education. She has done outstanding research and written extensively on issues of education, caste and gender.



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Q: You had a very long association with TISS right from the 60's onwards, so this is a kind of oral history, reflecting on your times at TISS, reflecting on the changes, reflecting on interesting memories that you might have of those time. So we'd like to start off with your initial association with TISS, how did you land up in TISS?

SC: Okay, I'll start at the beginning. I was teaching at Bombay University. I was a reader, I was up for readership. I was young, in '64; I was thirty one years old. And I was getting restless for research, because a teaching job is, was monotonous for me. You taught the same thing year in and year out and no matter how creatively you taught, you still were stuck in a place, and besides it was in third five year plan period, lot of development, and excitement in the air. And I thought I simply had to do development related research.

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SC: There was no chance of anything like that happening at the university, and just on a hunch I said maybe, maybe Tata Institute deals with welfare services, social work, it has a director now whose a known social scientist, it's a deemed university, it is an institution set up by Tata's - it's the kind of place that would look ahead and move. So I just took an appointment with Dr. Gore and came there. We didn't know each other at all, and I still remember he and IP Desai were sitting in this office which we all know so well, and talking about something. And then when I came they said what you want. I said what I want is...I don't even know how to put it, what I want. But this is it, I'm teaching, I enjoy teaching, but I want to do good research, and I want to do development related research, and the institute doesn't offer an opportunity for that. So I said I've just come looking for an opportunity here. So they said that we don't

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have any development related research opportunities at the institute yet. I said are you likely to get any? So they laughed, and they said no, what a pity but...

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SC: I went out, then they called me back again, and they said you know, you said is there anything likely to come up. We have just been approached by the education commission to take up a project. We have no project, no funds, but we're excited about the possibility of doing something, and we're looking for a younger person. So I said I'd love to join you. But they said, but you have a job right now. I said yes. And you've been promised a readership. I said yes. I said but I don't want any of it, I want to do research. They said well, if you're really keen, but we must warn you that you're giving up a very good opportunity that you already have, to come for something that doesn't exist. And I said that doesn't matter.

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SC: And for some time I taught at the university and also helped them. I had gone there in November 1964 but within a month or so I had given my resignation at the university, because their work was really beginning to go ahead in full swing. And I joined them. That's the beginning of social science research at the institute. Beginning of my career, and beginning of sociology of education as a discipline in the country. So the project as such, that project and what I learned from it is such a long story. I will give it to you. I have written out the story for a lecture I gave at the Annual Sociological Conference this year.

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SC: But about the institute you know, I now look back and I feel really that we just galloped ahead in those times. The institution was small, and I think that was its biggest asset. Because it was small it was focused. And growing big, growing important, acquiring its name, was not the goal. The goal at that time was to be useful to the government, to bodies like the World Bank, to bodies like the ILO, to bodies that needed social science research, to produce good research for them. That was the research orientation.

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SC: Also, and I think that this was Dr. Gore, he felt that every field of social work should have its own body of research done in India, and that was a very exciting climate to be in. I always felt that social science, social work perspectives, didn't meet as well as they could have, they should have. Because that would have been much more productive. They hung apart, they came together at points, they moved apart again, and I think that has been the story of the effort to marry social science to social work. Now at the age of 78 and after sixty years of experience as a sociologist, I feel that temperamentally social scientists and social workers are differently made. Social workers are doers, they are organisers, they need to get ahead, and little bits of logic or ill-logic here and there don't bother them in the way they bother a social scientist. They move ahead and do what has to be done. They don't have to know why it is being done. They have their own answers, but generally the make up is different. I don't know, you've been there, I don't know if you find this too. But I felt that it worked and it didn't work.

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SC: It worked in the sense that this institution is probably the only institution in the



world, I'm sorry in the country, that has done applicable research, or assessments of applications, assessments of efforts, development efforts and so on. On the scale that I don't think anybody else has done it in the country. I also feel that the institute was a central point where interests in the fields that.

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SC: As I look back I think there is another big role that social science research played from the institute. You know this whole idea of having international perspectives, or perspectives from different developing countries, or comparisons between developed and developing countries, were important, are important to research. And the institute was an institution where this could be brought together, from where this could be done. Now it has become so routine that one doesn't think of it as something that was difficult to do. And I think there are two factors that contributed to it, one that the institute was very well organized, second that admissions were very simple and direct. So when it moved ahead, and the size... it didn't move like a huge... it moved smoothly. So that is one, to me, valuable memory of the institute as an institution, and particularly led by Dr. Gore.

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SC: His personality, his perceptions, they were so sharp, his ability to take people together, along together. I admired that quality very much because I don't have it at all. I snap when I disagree, he never did. He could contain disagreement and take people along. So it's very rewarding, very satisfying to remember that phase. At the personal level, I joined the institute in 1964. I got an official position in 1971. But look at the fun of it! For the first six months I didn't get a pie, because I had made no contract, I had made no deal, and in the excitement of our work we had forgotten that



I had to get a salary. And then after about six months I sheepishly went to Dr. Gore one day and I said I am not being paid anything. So he said what do you mean? You haven't received anything? I said no. He said but you were to receive an honorarium, did you ever ask for it? I said no. And then it turned out that I had asked in April or May, and the accounts were closed in March, so November December January February March, I was written off because I hadn't asked for... but it just illustrates the kind of...the spirit or the excitement with which we worked at that time.

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SC: The other thing I remember was about...well when the work was completed the education commission was so pleased with our work that they set up this unit for research in the sociology of education and I was invited to be its head. So this readership that I had left behind and not taken came after seven years. And I think it was a much more meaningful one because it was in a field that I was all excited about the growth of that field. But the other thing- about ten-fifteen years later, I think around the 80's, CV's came into vogue. I doubt if Dr. Gore himself, for all that he had done in his life till then, could have produced a decent CV. We grew up with the value that you must not hold what you have done in your palm to show it off to others. You've done, shaabash! Now leave it behind and move ahead. So I remember, now when people send their glossy CV's, some are printed, some are photographs, such shiny little books, I'm half amused and half regret because when anybody says what about those years? I've never documented anything that I have done.

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SC: So these are the little differences. The library...why do I forget the name of the librarian? Mr Naidu...Oh how can I forget his name? But the library was, I don't know



if you get that kind of help the library now. You needed something and you went to the library, and the whole library would be looking. All the peons and everybody would be looking for whatever you would be looking for. We didn't have any of these technologies; we didn't have what library has maintained on computer or anything. But within about an hour or so, Shantaram or somebody would fetch the material for you. And it is amazing how much they knew. Madam, tumi scheduled caste ka kaam karta hai na? Te sabhi pustake ekde sa parti. You know every new field that came to the institute with great excitement they would come and...

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SC: Then the other thing I remember about the institute, you know the dining hall food was quite good, particularly the dahi. I wonder if it is as good anymore. But I now realise, and I realised that after I went to SNTD that these little things give institutions their reputation and stature and climate. You know a bunch of students happy with what they get in their canteen is a completely different proposition from a hostel full of dissatisfied residents. These were the little things...the garden in the institute. You know Pannakal put his heart into that garden, and now looking back I find the institute has many more facilities, is much richer, is much more diverse in what it offers, but I think some of that intimacy, purposiveness, a sense of being together in whatever you were doing, some of that is gone. And I suppose that is part of change, it has to happen if institutions grow, but quite frankly I think that if an institution is able to retain that, it doesn't matter that it deals with fewer fields, it does what it does with a different kind of strength.

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Q: Could you talk a little more about Professor Gore's contribution, because he was

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the director right from the 60's....

SC: Prof. Gore's contribution how can I describe it in generic terms basic contribution was that he got social work and social science together I don't think anyone had ventured to do that. social science courses were always taught to social work students, but this was different there is difference between something that traditionally has been a part of the curriculum and something that is put in because someone says that this is some thing they also must know. Then I think, I was very much part of the feeling that too much of the material placed before social work students is American. Too many of the perspectives are American, they need to understand the realites with which they work from a really Indian perspective. Another director in Dr. Gore's place I doubt would have caught that so quickly & helped that move. I remember he asked what particular field do you think this could..... I said the socialization of the child so then we had started teaching some courses to social work students & family and welfare in medical and psychiatric social work they had not quite the course in socialization, but they looked at the background and the upbringing in order to look at the formation of personalities. I found that what they spoke about was not about the Indian child's childhood, its not the Indian child's upbringing. so that is one for instance one course where socialization we tried to look at the Indian upbringing & I remember when we did that course I would ask students questions about..... I would ask them to draw a cat or a house for instance and we would compare the pictures. The students who had been to convent/ missionary schools /convent schools would draw a neat little house with a path and a garden and a water can and a window and curtains. The students who came from vernacular backgrounds, especially if they came from Bombay would draw tumble down rectangles one on top of the other that's the chawls they knew. They were never asked to draw houses in their schools probably.

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then I'd ask them to draw a cat then the western school child would promptly come with these two circles the small one on top of the big circle a long tale two triangles for ears eyes whiskers and there was the cat. The vernacular students would struggle to draw this real cat and we had differences. Now these differences would have got lost, Dr. Gore would pick them up and you could talk to him and say this is the way this is.

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Or you asked a student when she had a bath and the Hindu girl would say what you mean early in the morning when I got up and a Christian or a Muslim girl would easily say at the end of the day. Now the Hindu girl would argue further and say it is better to bathe in the morning it's the cleanest. The other would say at the end of the day when you are filthy is the time to bathe. So we'd laugh and say how our values get formed. how our perceptions of..... so I think this kind of teaching that one was able to do would have been very difficult without a director like Dr. Gore.

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First and foremost his commitment towards marrying social science to social work... he was basically I think committed to social work. But He was a good social scientist and convinced that it can be useful to social work. so I think creating in the institute this awareness I don't know if it has survived enough and even in out times I don't know it was appreciated enough and understood, but his passion for doing social work related social science I think lifted social science to a level of practicality which was very valuable.



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Maybe the work we did at the institute remained a little weak theoretically as social scientist. I wouldn't describe Dr. Gore as a great theoretician either and I am not at all a theoretician but the ability to catch concepts employ them use them and engage them for an understanding of ongoing reality or to plan something to apply I think that is something Dr. Gore created. Then of course this whole idea of reaching out to others. Courses for the police & courses for.... not many people would have thought of that. Infact I said I have written something and I'll give it to you, but I remember that in very narrowly (I call them) people make a distinction between popular lectures and highly..... Something has happened over the years and I think it started at the institute. Where I said ok you give your academic discourses which only other academics can understand, but in the end it is how much you can communicate the concepts and the perspectives that make you special as a specialist grounded in and discipline relevant to society. So you know the feeling that you had to be.... you were a good social scientist even if you didn't communicate adequately, but you were a good scientist for society if you bothered to and considered important to and tried to use what you had to help others understand and I think that also.... Dr. Gore was too I think, he would never articulate all this but if you lived and worked with him you found yourself doing all these things and you often asked yourself would I have done this in another place.

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So I think a good director nurtures newness, nurtures creativeness very unobtrusively and it was the same with discipline. I'll tell you interesting stories about discipline I don't know if I mentioned it that day I think I did when we.. For his memorial

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meeting, but one this is, I used to come to work very early. I used to come at 9'o clock just right after the children left for school I would come to the institute. Husband was gone by 8 children were gone by 8 I came to the institute by 9. Dr. Gore would always be there. At the dot of nine he was in office. He never asked you to come on time, but he was there on time and that sank in and you were there on time.

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Then I remember he started a PhD programme. I was a part of the team that started the programme and I was one of the first students and at that time we were doing this project and we had calculated man power all wrong and I was the only person for this whole national project. Dr. Gore, I and Ramachandran helped a little. We were only very few and there was loads of work. I would be working through the night but I had joined the PhD programme every Friday Dr. Gore would come to me or particularly when I had to write a term paper he would come and say what work were you going to do for the project over the weekend and I would have this file he'd say Mrs. chitnis"mala dya tey me karen" and he did it over the weekend I did my paper and that was it.

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Then we fell short of money on this particular project. War Pakistan war china ..... war broke out and the NCERT that was funding the project ran out of funds and what do you think we did? My husband was on vacation, we decided to beg the IIT Kanpur to do our work on their computers. Baba abandoned his vacation and did all the programmes. Huge data some 45k respondents, 8 kinds of respondents. Huge project. He sat and did this and yet we didn't have enough help for the calculation. It was April may and part of June. We sat all the institute staff children down who were of



an age that could use slide rule and we did a lot of the calculations on slide rules. Now I think part of this drive was because I was a woman. We are resourceful if we don't have something we tear something we find the resources and that kind of thing no formal director or very few would have accepted. Dr. Gore himself would sit with this slide rule and Vikas and Anita and my children and all the children in the compound.

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So I don't know if it was the age, the period, the people, but this is what comes through to me as the institute lead by Dr. Gore.

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Q: Very interestingly we have talked about the beginning of research within TISS and setting up of research units. Could you talk a little more about what were the other units that you set up and also about if research issues and methods were different in the early days? Did it change over a period of time? The way in which research developed at TISS.

SC: When I came to the institute, research methodology was already being taught Ramachandran was in charge of it. Then we used to get a lot of projects requests from the central government, the state government planning commission Indian council for social science research so we leaned towards statistical research. Initially I was the only social scientist there with Dr. Gore and IP Desai from Surat came very often to help. I was very inside of me dissatisfied with statical research. I used to teach qualitative perspectives, but the notion that research must grow had taken root and newer and newer units were starting. Infact the unit for research in child and women formally started before the unit in the sociology of education. Then there was the unit



for urban and rural studies.

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See it was linked to the need to understand to understand rural sociology. So one by one the units started coming. How did they come about? Very unobtrusively. There was never a big noise never a big.... The notion that this field of social work should have a research unit attached would be born and a unit would come up. Some times were sought out to start units. for instance when in the late 70's the women's studies began to come to the fore , the Ford Foundation approached us and requested that we start a unit on women's studies. There weren't many people. The Ford Foundation wanted me to take that second unit up and so did Dr. Gore, but he used to leave me free. In this case we met the Ford foundation people, they said we would like Mrs. Chitnis to take this up we would like you to have a unit and at that time I said no you should have gone to the university because that is a women's SNDT university and that is where they should start first.

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So they did go but they came back to us, came back to Dr. Gore and Dr. Gore said Mrs. Chitnis we'll start something. You look after both units for a while and let's see what happens. So we started on women's studies and that year the UGC team comes and they were so pleased they wanted to give a unit to the institute. I talk about the women's studies unit because I know that story well. I don't know the beginnings of the other units that well, but the point here is that the idea that there should be social science units researching into fields of application was catching up and union bodies like the UGC and the Ford Foundation came up to us, we had good reputation for the quality and relevance of the work we did. Even they would come and say we would



like you to start something. The units grew one by one. I don't know the dates but between 1968 and 1980 most of the units that exist in the institute today... The last to come up was the unit in health and hospital administration.

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Now they didn't all retain the name of research unit. Hospital administration is a case in point but conceptually they were units that would teach do research just as sociology of education did to PhD students, M.Phil students and also taught courses to social work. So they were basically conceived as little cells within that would teach and do research. How did they come up? I think they came up because they worked. I think they turned out to be useful practical and they came up, but the balance between social work and social science I keep on thinking... I may be wrong I may be over expecting, my expectations may be too high but I feel that the kind of close easy communication between these two even within the units didn't ripen like it should have. I don't know if I have answered your question.

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Q: In addition to research you were also teaching could talk a little more about teaching at TISS, how it was very different from the rest of the.....

SC: It wasn't because in the end I think even... we also had big classes. The basic sociology course that Dr. Gore used to teach before I came was a class of 70-80 and it was a lecture. No different from anywhere else. The students I think were a little mature, but I found the same thing when I taught at the colleges of nursing. The students are mature and more focused. That made a little difference.

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I can only talk about my teaching experience. I never taught a topic as a topic from beginning to end. A topic was always an issue a concept to be communicated a topic was always a history of something to be seen with students. Now as far as that kind of teaching went I used to do the exact same at elphinston college where the class was 20 students. At Bombay University where it was 100 and something and at Tata institute where it was 70-80. I think for other teachers for social work teachers it would have made a difference, but they would have to then compare with other applied knowledge teachers. For medicine or nursing or engineering. When you are talking about application, teaching is a little different.

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SC: when you ask the question what exactly was in your mind when you say how it was different.

Q: first of all in TISS you have a very inter disciplinary type of curriculum which is bringing together things, you have a link with the fields which is not there in a traditional university system which is divided into disciplines, so in that sense I was trying to explore.

SC: I think that is a good question, but again a course in English literature or a course in history these are subjects where you don't touch the field much but if these subjects were taught at the institute I don't think the teaching would be very different. Infact if a teacher in economics or a teacher in statistics taught a class I don't think it would be very different.

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the point was that the subjects were a little differently geared and for those who wanted to take the reality of the students backgrounds and their work then Tata



institute was a particularly good fun place to teach, but you could also do the drab routine teaching. It is not fair to put it like this but I do remember when we did a PhD one of our own colleagues used to teach us stats and if we asked questions he would get very annoyed and he would say to me (you must take the name out then I'll give you the name) that you know I teach a class like a straight class and you listen like a straight student don't ask questions. Now that only proves the point that there are teachers who will teach statistics in a way in which they call straight and there are teachers of statistics or mathematics which are as dry subjects as could be who are also excited like JHELM PARANPE the odyssey dancer she has done a beautiful dance on a theorem by an Indian mathematician. Have you seen that? Bhaskara's mathematics jhelum could see it as a lyric or a poem or a dance. I'm sure bhaskara could too. So I think yes and no to the extent that the topics and subjects taught at SNTD (she means TISS) were more inclined to application. Teaching was different, but so would it be in other professional institutions. Ultimately, if there was a difference it is because that an institution which applies what is taught and prepares students for application is a more exciting place for a teacher who enjoys creative teaching. In that sense yes.

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Q: any memorable moments of teaching?

SC: oh lots. Management students. I thought I got my first taste of management students at TISS. Management and IIT students have a chip in their shoulders. They think they have it all. I remember I used to sit at the extension at the end. I remember one day a whole bunch of management students barged into my room because they had got, they were marked much lower than they expected. This was going to affect their scores and they were very upset. They barged in and they said you have been

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entirely subjective so I said of course I have. So they said how? You have to be objective. I said nobody said so. I said objective assessment is important but so is subjective.

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I said I am here because I am me. Therefore my assessment or my judgment of you matters. So I said and I have marked you very carefully. If you had said that you are careless I would have accepted, but you are saying I am subjective and of course I am. I can tell each of you why you have done how you have done, how you could have done better and if there is a grain of good in your answer I will point it out to you. If there is anything unsatisfactory I'll point that out to you. So that is one of my memories of teaching. My memories of teaching at Tata institute, because they were relatively disciplined.

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At the commerce college, I taught at Sydneham nem for some time. Sydneham again are naughty rowdy boys, I was all of 18. I graduated at 18 and I started teaching at 18. What do you expect a class to do with an eighteen year old teacher? Make the miserable and throw her out. I discovered one trick. Try and spot the naughtiest and rowdiest of them all and ask him a question. Now that not being able to answer a question is a shame not even the naughtiest of them can stand and I discovered that if you asked this question and those mischief maker stood up floundering for an answer then you has silence for the rest of the hour. So these are some of the memories of teaching.

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There are other memories too. They used to do a research project and there were many interesting subjects floating asking surfacing to be researched but we had no budgets anywhere to do it. Then I started doing team research for these projects. You remember Purnima Mane?

Purnima's batch for instance, there was a loud cry all the time about students at Elphinston and Xaviers taking drugs and there was no proper study. I thought this would be a great opportunity to get a bunch of students doing research under me and they were all ex-Xavierites and ex-Elphinstoneites to get some data and each one got a little. We pooled it up and we published it. There is a little publication called drugs on the college campus. So some of these teaching memories very rich and we learnt two or three thing. First I learnt that you cannot really communicate an idea to your students unless you have understood it completely and thoroughly. You cannot talk, you can talk I guess but you cannot communicate. So that is the first thing that I learnt. Second that if you couldn't lecture in simple language and you had to hide under technical terms you haven't understood your subject enough. This is the other thing I have learnt.

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So a lot of learning. I also found that there is. Best source of strengthening your concepts, strengthening your understanding of any issue, is to ask for questions in the class. Reflecting on these questions takes you miles ahead. I think students are far more precious teachers to the teachers than the teacher ever is to the students. So these are memories from my teaching that I find very valuable.

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Q: how do you look at TISS as a work place?

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SC: ooh I loved it as a workplace I called it my karma bhoomi. It was a fabulous work place and why was it a fabulous work place, it did work that mattered. That could be applied. That could be used. At the same time it was not like a technical shop not a technology shop. It was work that was useful but also works that could be intellectually stimulating. Intellectually exciting. It raised questions it gave you the opportunity to produce data. As a researcher that somebody could use so freedom enormous freedom. And I think all of us like a workplace that demands something of you. To be working with energy and excitement and involvement is one of the happiest feelings in life. Tata institute gave us the space and encouragement for that and the freedom. And the freedom is very important. I remember there were time I would go from the institute at 4'o clock instead of 5 I would come at 7 and work again till 10 and go home at 10.i would go home at 4 when the children were de from school, we would have dinner they would go to bed then I would drive back to the institute. Do whatever I had to do. Carrying work home was one alternative. That was not always possible. Sometimes some papers and so on easier to work at the institute. I had this freedom. I had the freedom to come at 7 go at one. Had the freedom to come and work at night. My office would be open for me. None of this has happened at the university. So as a karmabhumi. Then the context it gave. You know you meet people from so many places. People from so many fields and you got invited. Somebody meet you, invited you. The institute did not count how many times you went out. I went to so many meetings and conferences got back something for the institute each time. But that kind of opportunity.

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There is only one kind of occasion when Dr. Gore said Mrs. Chitnis it will be... I'd rather that you don't go this time and I did not go. It did not make any difference if

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there was a. I had gone I think two or three times in succession and at some point he might have got the feeling that some of us are going more often than the others he wanted to level it off to some equal opportunity. We had so much opportunity that once in a while the administrator in charge said... you know you didn't have to make a big effort. It was a fantastic work place

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Q: As time have changed from the 60s to the 90s and 2000s, the agendas in research and education have also changed you want to reflect a little on the kinds of changes

SC: much more sophisticated. Research is much more sophisticated now. I have been out of touch. I won't be able to say much... but it is far more sophisticated. Perspectives are far more (and I am very happy for that) interdisciplinary that they used to be. People are doing things and saying things with much greater courage than they ever had. Research has also become far more complex. I think the diversification the break down into small and smaller components. Would I say that technology has made for a big difference? But you know the change in scale always makes for change in character. To that extent computers have made a big difference. When Dr. Gore and I used the Kanpur IIT computer for the sociology of education computer that literally was the first time this size data had been calculated by a university. Academic institution. Census operation and so on this was always done but it was the first time. The fact that it was feasible was at that time astounding but that has changed now the scale of.... in social science research that scale is not half as puzzling as in fields like biology. Neuron biology where my son works. I think concepts from one field drifting into another have enriched research. The walls between disciplines and fields no longer as water tight and untransparent as it used to be and that is enriched research.

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I often wonder you know I have been in administration since 1990 and I miss research. I do whatever I can as a researcher even as an administrator. I often feel nostalgic for my research days and I often wonder what I would do? I am getting interested increasingly in researching traditions and researching the past. In that world so much new is happening. You know the way in which history archeology anthropology even geology have come together have come together to provide proof from one field to the other. It's so exciting. I sometimes feel it would be such fun to start life as a researcher at this point in time. Of course I have.....

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for instance the manner in which rig Vedic poems have begun to speak differently because of archeological research that have helped give meaning, practical meaning to some rig Vedic statements. Just imagine working stuff like that. So I think research is more exciting than it was. It was exciting than what it was. was.

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Q: you did a lot of research into the education of the schedule cast schedule tribe talk a little about that.

SC: ok I'll talk a little about that work. That is the work I started with and I was upper middle class, upper class f sorts very westernized but fortunately for me I came from a home where my parents were very committed to doing something for women and doing something for untouchables. Infact they ran a hostel for what was then called backward class community boys so somewhere in the heart the seed was sown and when I came to the institute it was just chance. It so happened that for the government

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to work on the SC/ST was priority later on women now you have asked me a question I don't know if my answer will be appropriate, correct. Whatever happened is very interesting I did a lot of statistical work lots and lots of it is published. Inside of me I was restless. I saw these figures I saw these... but I didn't have a feel for the life. I had seen something as a child; I had seen tribal people in tattered conditions. I grew up in Amarawati. Tribals used to come to our door every Sunday with these little birds to sell and honey combs and they wore nothing and looked so famished you had always felt something wrong there.

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Then I had seen untouchability practiced not in our home. I must mention this. I came from a home where my father was the eldest so they had the family gods and the tradition is that the student does the worship so we had a mahar boy do the worship. Now imagine in the 1940s this was absolutely outrageous. My father's logic was simple. The tradition says a student should do the worship and get a little money out of it as a student. That was it. My mother used to have haldi kumkum but you know who she invited? Widows she invited other women and along with them widows. Now widows never did go and non widowed women never accepted them sitting by them in a haldi kimkum. So it had always been trying to break tradition through the practice of tradition. There were Hindus by birth but basic humanists and very accumenical.sso this was the background. I was doing statistical work and you can imagine how restless I was. So I decided the way to bring life to my figures to read dalit literature. And I didn't read enough Marathi. I struggled I read LAKSHMAN MANE, DAYA PAWAR lot of lovely autobiographical semi autibiographical and the Marathi language there is very different from the middle class upper cast Marathi that we spoke. My Marathi was already weak we couldn't understand this. So I went to

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people like Vasant Bapat. I said bapat mala zara he jara samjhaun sangta? He laughed at me. He said you cannot speak proper Marathi you can't read good Marathi and you are reading this rubbish. I put my back up is aid I don't care for literature (I did care but I was so angry) I want to hear the sounds and smells of these people's lives. I want to know these people and nobody has written about them and now they are beginning to write about themselves. So I was talking about research and there were one or two places where I couldn't understand about Lakshman's biography I still remember that they had ..... I'll give you two examples. LAKSHMAN wrote about his childhood and how basket weavers were nomads and how they lived outside this town or city they visited lived in communities and how they worked for two months and went on.

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So we were talking about research on the dalits. So there were two or three places where I did not understand Lakshman's biography words. One where it said he went from... within a year he would go to six different schools. He talked about how unwelcome he was in some schools, but the law then said these children cannot be rejected and the teacher has to accept them. Then he said my mother would give me a Tiffin and whenever I opened my Tiffin many upper cast children would come and ask me to give them something of what was in my Tiffin. The smell they loved. "chanya" now what was chanya, I was curious so I went to ask bapat of course did not know, but then I went to Lakshman for the answers. Chanya you know.... when an animal dies the carcass is divided into as many families as there are and each gets about 10-15 kgs of meat. Cow or buffalo or whatever it is. What can you do with that much? So the practice is that they had their fill and my mother would cut into thin

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strips and dry it in the sun and then that was crisp and tasty. You must be eating dry fish. One eats this dried bacon and people don't like it. They say it stinks but many of us love this and so did the uppercaste children in the school. I used to be terrified because what if my teachers found out and what if their parents found out would be thrown out. That was one story.

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the other was a word called "gaba gaba" you know in Marathi when you have guests looking after you own family children the first thing you say is "sawkash houdya haan" - take your time. "gaba gaba" means gobble it up. if you eating it up gracelessly, fast in marathi you would say to a chils "baka baka nako khau. baka baka khalas tar tras hoil". gabagaba is way beyond bakabaka. I asked lakshman what is this gabagaba/? He says you people have all the time in the world and all the food in the world we have neither. We usually get food in large quantities only at your weddings and your thread ceremonies and your ceremonies when you feed the poor. He said there the instructions that our elders give us are eat it up. So the idea is to stuff yourself with as much as you possible can and then to put the remaining in a little bag and carry it home.

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Then there was another thing. His book says that we used to camp near the hangandari. What do you think hagandari is? It is the pit outside the town where all the nights soil Is thrown. Now my precious Bapat did not know any of these words. I learnt two things. I learnt the disdain with which upper cast intellectuals treat the dalit treat their literature treat their language and I also learnt about the life of these



people. So talking about research on the sc/ st tribes. I did a lot, I did volumes. For the central government. I meaning through the institute. Central government state government, ICSSR and a lot of it is published. It was one of the most fascinating world of discovery of my life .I learnt to use; literature and to use history to understand social science. `

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Now I wish that courses in social science would give more of literature and history and get students to interpret it and the other way round. I talk to students of literature. Very few of them are sensitive to these realities. They are reading them they are looking at illustrations all their life. I have come across fine minds that are just enthused about the syntax and the meter and whatever , and moved by the substance and somehow unaware of larger issues of oppression and discrimination. So as far as that research in that area I don't know how much of it was used. I always felt as compared to the data that we collected and we gave, the use was very limited. In the end I hate and I hope I am wrong but I think what was done is eventually politically influenced only what was politically visible, important was done. It was very revealing and for me it was a tremendous learning experience. I even read the Manusmriti and so on, for research connected with the gender and cast discrimination issue. Otherwise where would I have gone to read the Manusmriti? So it was research the lead me into the most precious reading. Precious knowledge.

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Q: platinum jubilee, any reflections, anything relevant.

SC: it is relevant but I don't know if I want to put it in there.

what is relevant is I am very happy to see the institute in its seventy fifth year, I feel I

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am out of tune with the times and being quite anachronistic when I say this but I often worry that it isn't getting too big too fast. It's survived so many years and it will survive many years and it will survive always. It is established, it's good but there is, was a quality and all old people say this." there was a time when" but I somehow feel I am not saying it in that spirit. Excellence is important and there are institutions in the world that have remained excellent despite their growth. I hope the institute retains that excellence, even definitions of excellence concepts of excellence change but deep down excellence doesn't.

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Sometimes I wonder when I look at the institute's work, it is very difficult to say this because nobody there believes or accepts such a criticism and why would anybody who belongs to the times accept the criticism of the times. This is a thought an anxiety, of someone who has loved the institute and enjoyed it thoroughly and who is wary about this truth.

Does that make sense to you or does it seem too negative?