Prof. Nasreen Rustomfram

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Prof. Nasreen Rustomfram holds a doctoral degree in Social Work and her area of study was Management of Human Service Organisations.Her career at TISS focuses on adult learning, facilitation and development.Her substantive areas of interest include adult and lifelong learning,human services management and gerontology.

She has served as Dean (Students Affairs) and as Chairperson of the Centre for Lifelong Learning.She has served as a member of the UGC Standing Committee for Adult Education and is a member of the UGC National Consultative Committee of the Capacity Building Programme for Women Managers in Higher Education and is a Key Trainer for the same. She also serves on Committees of the National Literacy Mission Authority, MHRD,GOI.

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Q: When did you come to TISS and what was your specialisation?

NR: The first time I came to TISS was in 1974 and the institute found that I was young by 45 days even after giving an exemption of six months. I was 19 and a half years old when I had completed my graduation from Sophia College. Because of the age limit, I could not get admission. I spent a year in Bombay waiting to apply the next year. That is how in 1975 I was able to enter the institute. I joined M.A. in Social Work with a specialisation in urban and rural community development, URCD as it was known at that time. It was the year in which the Head of our department, Prof. Kaikobad was already on-lien, I think, with one of the UN programmes. He was posted in Afghanistan at that time and Prof. V.G. Panvalkar was the acting head of the department.

Q: Are there any professors you remember in particular who stand out?

NR: You may have heard this answer very often, you know that Prof. Grace Mathew was really one person I remember distinctly at that time. Also for the reason that the subject she took up was completely new to me. For my graduation I had done history, politics and Hindi. For the first time I was exposed to a subject that required working with individuals or case work with a large dose of psychology, applied psychology terms, mental health etc. was a completely new area. I remember the enthusiasm and vigour with which Prof. Mathew taught us this particular subject. Of course, she was very outgoing and she was also our hostel warden. We knew her on all different fronts. I really remember her distinctly.

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Q: What was hostel life like in campus?

NR: Campus life was very close in the sense you could immediately recognise anybody who was in the hostel or not in the hostel. The number of students were maybe about 60-70 of us. There were only two hostels and the third one was just coming up. What is today known as the Men's Hostel-I and the Ladies Hostel-I were the only two buildings apart from the dining hall. Of course the main quadrangle of the institute with the 'tree of knowledge' was also there.

Q: What was your area of field work?

NR: At that time the first year was a generic course and in the second year you did your specialisation in the third and fourth semester. In the first year I was placed at the David Sasoon Institution for the Juvenile Boys, a closed institution where the boys were boarders. My supervisor was Sanobar Shekhar, at that time Sanobar Sahni. The institution was of course an eye-opener. I was my first constant brush with poverty. Children were staying in really, circumstances which for the first time one realised, what it was to barely survive. The institution also had its own host of problems apart from a resource crunch. The whole area of juvenile delinquency was very closely regarded at that time with criminal behaviour. Much of the understanding we have today that juvenile delinquency is also spurred by adverse circumstances and poor parenting skills was almost non-existent at that time. The staff at the institution was completely untrained. There were more like caretaking staff. I remember some of the cases I handled over there. Most of them were children who were utterly frustrated with no parental care. They had been virtually left to themselves and they had developed some sort of signs of disturbance which had led them to indulge in activities like stone-throwing. In one case, actually one of the boys was there because he had thrown excreta on the face of his father. When I handled that case I remember that for the first time visiting the boy's home and the father agreeing to visit his child in David Sassoon. When I brought this news back to the organisation they were completely stumped. They said that the boy had been there for five years and the father had never made an effort, not even to make a phone call or even

to find out how the child is. His coming was quite an event. Interestingly, when he actually came...I wasn't sure that he would come and the organisation also suggested that I fix up a date with him and accompany him. He was staying somewhere in Antop Hill and he knew the shortest walking route and accompanying him was an experience in itself. For the first time in my life I remember virtually running behind him for about two and a half to three kilometres while we criss-crossed between the railway tracks and some foot over-bridge, crossed between Gandhi Market to Matunga and Matunga West. Finally...I was quite relieved when the gate of David Sassoon Institute appeared. I remember he was a very fast walker. Seven members of the institution were there in the room to see who this person was who actually came to meet his child after five years. That is an incident I remember very well.

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Q: Do you remember some of the challenges you faced as a student?

NR: Challenges in the field? I was not one of those students who were very questioning. I was more an absorbing kind of student. Coming from a pretty sheltered and middle-class background everything that I was undergoing was quite an experience for me to just take in and understand. Actually I was totally involved in field-work. I used to look forward to Monday and Tuesday. Though the institute never asked us to, the situation of stark poverty made me keep only three sets of sarees to wear on those days because I felt it was not good for the children to see me coming in better clothes. I was fond of clothes and I had lots of them. But I chose to wear only those three sarees every Monday and Tuesday. Somehow I felt I had done the right thing because somewhere during the middle of the year in two or three sessions the boys had a discussion within themselves and one of them came back and told me, "Didi, aapke pas bhi bahut kapre nahin hain. Ap bhi teen hi saree pehenke aati hain."(Didi, even you do not have too many clothes. You wear just three clothes) For me, actually that was an acknowledgement. I felt that they had accepted me as one among them. I don't know how and why I did this. I just felt

vindicated that I had done the right thing. And that children also thought that I was not very rich or was showing off, something like that. The challenge for me really was to find out a better way of doing what I was doing. I think I really grew in sensitivity, qualities like empathy, ability to understand adolescent boys in particular. The kind of raw energy that they have which needs to be channelized was understood. Because when we used to plan activities for them, there were hardly any sedentary activities which they were at all interested in. Even though our supervisors would persuade us to plan a story-telling session...something like that...see, I can't even remember the sessions. The only thing they really enjoyed was football. In that session from 2 o'clock to 4 o' clock we would start off a little bit with maybe, story-telling or trying to make some articles or giving them some information. Scabies was a huge health problem. So we also had some health sessions and so on. I was totally stumped when they said "There was no water to take a bath" I did not know what else is there to say because there was this whole session on bath and cleanliness. Maybe that went on for half an hour at the most and then two or three of the more vocal boys would stand up and say," Didi, abhi bahut ho gaya. Abhi football leke ao."(Didi, we have had enough lessons. Now we should have a round of football) so that was it and there was no point doing anything more with them except getting them to play football because they could not go out. Thankfully it was an old time institution, it had a large compound. And then, sometimes, of course we used to have Room 2 with Room 4 in the football match and stuff like that. They also liked wandering around, talking between themselves. What we were really couldn't…were helpless about was the culture of the place. Older children would bully the younger ones...I think that for me was a challenge. I kept thinking how to impact those boys into also being sensitive to the younger ones but I don't know I did much dent with that with them in that particular year. It's just the three students that I spoke to and did case-work with that I could impact. I asked them to think about it. Never having lived in a family, having been away from the family for so long they didn't really respond to the idea of a younger brother or younger person or looking after them. So one wasn't really able to awaken those instants.

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Q: What was it that brought you back to TISS?

NR: When I was here I never ever thought I would become a teacher. I was very clear that I was training to be a social worker and I worked for 7-8 years with an NGO. Sometime during that period one of the faculty from the institute approached me in 1983 and asked me if I was interested in coming to a position at the institute. I looked at the profile of that particular centre and that was the department of Extra-Mural Studies. It was very clear that they were not teaching post-graduate students and that they wanted somebody who would continue with training and outreach and extension work. During the last three-four years of my work with the NGO I had myself turned a lot towards training. One of the first training programmes for urban community health workers was organised by us. Then we had gone into training of employers on how to sensitise them about child labour and how to work with children. So when this suggestion was made to me, I applied for the post and it had been advertised twice earlier and the institute had been looking for somebody who would join this department with this bent towards training and facilitation and reaching out to adult learners. That is what attracted me and that is how I came back, came to work with the institute, never imagining that I would stay here for more than 20 years. So, what I joined was the department of Extra-Mural studies which started in 1982. I joined in '85. Prof. Ashok Yesudhian was the head of the department at that time. We were only two of us. The certificate course in Hospital Administration had begun and after I joined I started the short-term training programmes. I remember doing something for community health workers and then for the youth workers. I think in 1988 after Dr. Geeta Shah joined us we started the certificate course in Social Work. Since then the centre has been offering different outreach programmes for adult learners.

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Q: What was the purpose with which the department of Extra-Mural Studies was set up?

NR: Basically it was started to function as the extension wing of the institute. Apart from teaching and research, in 1977 the UGC had mandated that teaching, research and extension - all three should equally be the duties of a university. Based on that in 1982 this department was established that it should reach out to working adults. It should also provide for professional courses specially for the helping professions. So it could be anybody. For example, say, from the human resources field or they could be teachers, doctors, nurses, counselors, and staff of NGOs. There was a lot of untrained manpower in the field of social work and social welfare that we were looking at. We were looking to reach out to these groups so that they could come in the ambit of some scientific study and do their work better. That was the main purpose.

Q: Do you think that the extra-mural studies have evolved in different areas?

NR: The interesting thing about extra-muralling or now what is known as lifelong learning since 2006, is actually a very unique way in which the institute looks at its courses. Right from the start, the social work courses always had field work and field extension with it. The personnel management programme that started in 1966 had a large amount of field work. Even today, business management and business schools actually look at this course as a model for how, even for human resource management studies, we have always offered a field placement. Not as a block at the end but concurrent field work along with theory. So that practice always went on along with theory. For extra-muralling in traditional universities this would be the only department that actually went out of its way to incorporate field work and field extension and practice. But, at the institute, the department of extra-mural studies had to make its own way and path. Because all the other schools and centres had their own extra-muralling efforts. All of them were engaged in some way with organisations beyond the university and beyond

teaching only the PG students. So the Centre for Lifelong Learning or earlier called the department of Extra-mural Studies always had to be very alert to think of new demands in the field. That's how we came upon an area of work like working for children of alcoholics. For example, one realized that in the whole issue of alcoholism it was the alcoholic person, then the spouse who received the most attention from human service workers. What about the children? So we decided to work on what is the impact of alcoholism on children of alcoholics. Sometime, during the late 80s we worked on the child's right to play which at that time was an up and coming area. So we have always been on the look-out for gaps in professional education or particular areas where enough professional work has not been done. What we have done with the Centre for Lifelong Learning is that we take up these new programmes, we run them as short-term programmes or as certificate and diploma courses. In a sense, we incubate a new programme. We innovate. And once it is kind of stable and has found a market for itself we then hand it over to the main school from where we draw the academic expertise. That is what happened with the certificate in Hospital Administration. It soon became a diploma. And then the Department for Health Systems Studies ran it. Similarly the certificate in Personnel Management became a diploma in Personnel Management and then was taken over by the School of Management and Labour Studies to run. The certificate course in Social Work has never gone back to the School of Social Work in that sense. Actually we are re-looking at that course, whether a part time programme of that sort is required or whether we need to offer something in a different way. The diploma in Gerontology that we are offering is also a gap area. TISS is such a large institute but you find that there is very little research work as well as teaching courses in that area. In fact our certificate course in Social Work was the first course in the institute to have a course on the elderly. We offered it to our certificate students. Dr. Geeta Shah had the vision to see that India would soon become an ageing country and that we really needed a course by which we could develop professionals in this field. That is how we have identified the diploma in Gerontology to work on.

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Q: The concept of field action involves also looking at gaps in field and intervening in those areas. You yourself had very close association with Hum. Could you talk about it?

NR: Actually it was Lata Narain and me who together thought of this area of work. One of the first reasons for thinking in terms of an organisation like Hum was concern for your own neighbourhood. We work from Kashmir to Kanyakumari through our institute, but our own neighbourhood where we are situated in this M-Ward within Bombay has always been amongst the poorest wards of the city. It's social indicators in terms of maternal mortality rates or education drop-outs, in terms of health immunisation records has been amongst the worst. The health services are minimal and schools are just not sufficient for the population. More than 60-70 % of the population of M-ward actually lives in slums. Hardly 30-40% live in proper houses. But the ward also has such kind of contradictions in terms of BARC, the largest nuclear power station which is here. TISS and IIPS, two deemed universities are here. So, cheek-by-jowl with the slums are also the institutions of higher learning. We also have all the three largest refineries in this ward and also two major chemical industries in the ward. So there is a good deal of industrialisation, there are higher education institutions and then there is this very abysmal poverty and poor living standards that you can see all around. So we thought of working on rights-based issues within the ward and we thought of working, taking up different issues and approaching different constituents of the ward. So that is how we thought of the title - Humanity United in M-Ward. That's how it became HUM. We have been able to work on different issues like child rights, disability rights and then health rights in terms of solid waste management. We have been able to approach very different constituents like while working with children we have worked with schools. While working with disability rights we have worked with NGOs related to specific disabilities. In solid waste management we have been able to work with civic organisations like Citizen's Association and the Advanced Locality Management groups. So, as such through these 7-8 years we have been able to approach different constituents in the ward with the issues that interest them or in which they would

like to participate. In that sense we have built up a pretty good network of organisations with whom we can interact and who have come to know TISS which otherwise(was a mystery)..you know there is a very popular saying, "We have always wondered what is behind this high wall" and several all of them did not see that many students because it had been a small institution until 2006 with 200-300 students. Actually they did not know whether this was an institution of higher education and didn't that there are postgraduate courses being run. We have been able to change that picture a good deal and now people also know that you come here for extra-muralling and different kinds of activities.

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Q: What do you see as the future of HUM?

NR: The future of HUM is in fact, extensive and there is a huge scope of work. Because of the kind of network we have built up, with NGOs and different sectors, schools and health institutions for the M-Ward which has been constant. And also for the Platinum Jubilee Year the institute is planning a project around M-Ward. All the activities we have done are related to civic issues and there is some assistant engineer, junior engineer in the ward - somebody or the other - is linked to all these issues. They have the education officer for example - who sits there. Whatever issues we have taken up, the M-Ward office has been the focal point, and it's a civic office for us. With these types of contacts that we have built up, I think HUM would be able to take up any issue and move very quickly in the ward. So tomorrow if there is something on infant mortality rates, and we would like to bring down the IM rates for this particular area we would be able to get in touch with at least 6-7 NGOs who are working in different communities within a day or two. We can call for a meeting, orient them, also ask them what they feel is the need. For example, carrying out a needs assessment. That is something we would be able to do very quickly. It would not take us very long and people who we invite would not wonder as to why we are being called and what is about to happen. They know it will be a useful meeting. I feel this rights-based approach that we have tried to impart is working. Many of the NGOs related to

disability have for the first time understood that for example, the ID card which is given to a disabled person is not just a matter of facility but that it is a right in the sense that the Constitution has guaranteed equality to people with all types of challenges including the physically able and disabled. The giving of an identity card to such a person and the concessions that accompany it are not charity or they are just not something that is given out of sympathy or pity. It's the law of the land which says that people who are behind for some reason need to be given an equity measure by which they can get a little leg-up and be on par with those who don't suffer from those disabilities. For example, there is reservation in the case of social disability or caste disability. In that sense we think of the physically disabled requiring some measure to be put in place for them. The same thing we were able to explain to the schools in terms of the Right to Education even before the bill came. Because we spoke about the child's right to education. In that sense the message of the rights based approach really needs to go out to more constituents. Very often senior citizens' associations have thought that somebody is doing a favour to them by holding their hands, somebody is doing a favour to them by holding an activity or medical camp. In fact we have been able to say that there are many civic organisations that are headed by senior citizens. Because people in the world of work don't give that much time to the neighbourhood and it is actually the senior citizens after their 55-60 years of age that they really get involved in anything to do with beautification or cleanliness or traffic rules or observation of health and hygiene measures, cleaning up of drains - these are all the issues being taken up by the Advanced Locality Management. If you see the age of the persons who are mostly leading these movements they are all in their senior years. We have been able to bring it across to them. Right from children to senior citizens, we have been able to bring across this idea that what you are agitating for is not something that somebody does a favour for you. It is a right that has been given and it is not been accessed by you. That way HUM has a huge role to play.

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Q: Could you elaborate on the M-Ward project that the institute is starting on its 75th year?

NR: It's still in the planning stage. I think the focus is on urban governance and what we can do in distinct areas such as health, education, solid waste management where we would be able to get the government to make a system shift. On the one hand, we want to see deliverables - number of clinics need to be increased or number of hospitals or number of schools but in terms of making a systemic shift what we want to see is that the increase in schools is not just a question of another school - but that the right to education is being implemented. Similarly, in terms of say, bringing down infant mortality rates. We want to make a sustained effort to improve health services and in this, we want to involve all the better off partners who actually exist in this ward. Such as the corporates, and the government and various other organisations. WE want to show that all of them can partner to give that first push because what the ward right now requires is a surge. It needs to be pushed out from the level at which it is. Unless there is a propeller, unless there is a good momentum it will again be reduced to saving two children from dying - we don't want that just these two children be saved - we want two percent of the children to be saved. Or we want the infant mortality rate, which today are 90 per thousand to actually come down in the next five years to 45. Or let it come down to the same level as is in the rest of Bombay. Our benchmarks are such that it will give a push - that is what I mean when I say a systemic shift. It won't be small targets and small goals. It will mean that the ward requires this sustained effort to just push it out of the depth or the hole that it is in.

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Q: With regard to social work education and considering the association of TISS with it, where do you see the institution in the future?

NR: I see TISS assuming a much more prominent position in policy-making. I think all these years of sustained grassroots work have put us in a unique position of being able to contribute to long-term measures. I think that is one area in which we haven't really pushed very vigorously so far. In the next

decade at least, I definitely can see. Specially with the stance that the institute has now taken regarding displacement, environment issues, SEZs - all of this has put us in the forefront of being able to really make sustainable suggestions. The model of development that we want to see - its obvious that the way liberalisation and globalisationn forces have made their impact. Personally I feel that the tide cannot be turned back. It is still possible to intervene at critical points to make our voice heard. The kind of work that we are doing for NREGA, the kind of studies that we are doing with Vidharbha farmers - all of this will enable us in future. Of course there is the work that we have done with Ladakh and Andamans. We have been able to come up with a sustainable model of development. Recently we did a workshop with officials in Andamans at the senior-most level encouraging them to think in this way - if you want social development of Andamans what are all the areas you need to be looking at. Generally the bureaucracy has been sending a wish list - one college, two medical colleges, five this and that - actually to see what is health, health meaning from the point of view of people what would health mean. A medical college could be one part of it but if you ask for a huge budget for a medical college it does not even link up anywhere else. Its not even seen holistically as health. With the kind of information and expertise we have, we are making an impact on bureaucracy itself and plan for social development in a particular way. I think the results of that will also be seen in the 12th plan itself. We are in the process of making recommendations at several levels in that. We have made recommendations to the Ministry of Environment, to the Health Ministry - of course to the UGC in terms of Department of Education. I think I see TISS poised to make an impact on policies and feeding into policies.

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Q: On a lighter note, since the institute is in its 75th year - what message would you give to TISS?

NR: I would like to say that at least for the next five years we need to enter into a phase of

consolidation. My message to the institute would be that we have grown quantitatively very fast, that we should be now alert to the possibilities of some of our USPs and some of the things we have always stood for should not be watered down. One is the quality of education. With all the work that we undertake today like consultation and research and so on I think we should not lose sight of the teaching for postgraduate students - which is something very critical. The kind of attention that the faculty has traditionally given to students is a USP that should not go away. Secondly, concurrent field work along with theory has also been a hallmark of education at TISS. That should not get reduced to blocks of internship or something like that . The third area - we really need to look at how we will keep the community kind of feeling - the TISS community - what we will do to keep in greater touch with our alumni. Somehow we have not been very successful in this area. In the next five years we can give a push to this whole area - working with our alumni. Many of them are interested in giving back to the institution in different ways and I think the institute needs to be more responsive and more inviting to the alumni.