
8 Tata Institute of Social Sciences

Immersed in the Field

The Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) is part of India's higher education sector, which is one of the largest in the world, with more than 1,000 universities and over 42,000 colleges in the country. TISS is a multicampus institution, with headquarters and two of its five campuses in Mumbai, India's most populous city located on its western coast. TISS's three other campuses are in Tuljapur, 270 miles inland; Hyderabad, 430 miles inland; and Guwahati, nearly 1,700 miles away in Assam in the northeast region of India. The three branches outside of Mumbai are smaller and relatively specialized. Tuljapur was founded in 1986 and focuses on the rural economy and society. Guwahati, founded in 2009, offers master's degrees in social work and community development and also offers a diploma in community organization. Hyderabad, which opened in 2010, is oriented towards public policy and government and has a school of education. Over half of all TISS students are in postgraduate programs, and two-thirds are in Mumbai.

The main campus is a quiet green island in northeast Mumbai, a distinct contrast to the surrounding traffic and the suburban bus station opposite the street entrance to the campus. The quadrangle is small and serene; the library is usually open regardless of the hour; and onsite there are student hostels, a teaching block, and administrative offices and faculty residences. The trees and plants create a buffer to the heat and humidity of the city and are home to birds and monkeys. It is a very inviting space and welcoming community. One senior faculty member described it as "a lovely university. It's a very family place. We don't have any hierarchies around here. We all work together. And it's a nice place."

TISS specializes in the social sciences and offers multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary teaching and research programs, awarding first and advanced degrees and postgraduate diplomas. Since its founding in 1936 by India's oldest nonsectarian philanthropic organization, the Sir Dorabjee Tata Trust, TISS has valued research, practice, and teaching that engage with pressing social issues facing less privileged populations in the region.

Internationally TISS is well known in the social sciences and for its role as an independent source of data on social conditions in India prior to the country gaining independence in 1947 (Sudarshan, 2000). Domestically it is highly regarded, ranked sixtieth in the central government's National Institutional Ranking Framework in 2022. In terms of popular recognition, TISS is overshadowed by the elite Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Management (IIMs), along with the Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research. Locally it has well-established rivals for talent, including the very large University of Mumbai, and for prestige, notably, the Homi Bhabha National Institute, which has the patronage of the Atomic Energy Agency. Regionally it competes with universities like Symbiosis International University and Savitribai Phule University in Pune, a city of 4.3 million about three hours by car southeast of Mumbai.

TISS became a publicly funded "deemed" university in 1964. This status means that the university can secure government support for its academic work and that it can issue degrees in addition to diplomas. Today most of TISS's funding comes from the State and central governments. Both levels of government struggle to support the infrastructure and operating costs necessary to respond to rapidly increasing domestic demand for higher education. While it is largely publicly funded, TISS maintains strong and meaningful connections with the Tata family, Indian industrialists, and philanthropists whose businesses are still overseen from Mumbai. The Tata Trust's financial support for the institute phased down once it gained deemed university status and, after some delays, gained fiscal support from the central government (Gore, 2007). The Tata Trust continues to have three nominees on the governing board, while the State and central governments have one representative each. In the eyes of the local community, the association between TISS and the Tata Trust adds to the credibility of the institute.

The Tata family and its associated trusts have long been philanthropically active. Kumar (2022) documents the active role the Tata group played in conceiving and establishing the Sir Dorabji Tata School of Social Work, the original name for TISS, to do "more than research." The aim of the school was to produce a "new cadre of social workers" (p. 735) and be more

concerned with practical application of social work over research. This significant commitment was part of a portfolio of investments that aimed to support national development by fostering a “community of the gifted” that would “lead India’s modernization and development – in industry as well as society” (Kumar, 2022, p. 734). The Tata approach to philanthropy from the early 1900s was largely secular and aimed at constructing a stronger nation and, subsequently, was less focused on its religious (Parsi) roots (Kumar, 2018, p. 1443).

TISS TODAY

TISS’s current mission and vision emphasize a “socially relevant and high-quality professional education in a wide range of interdisciplinary areas of Social Sciences” and preparing professionals who can take roles in State and non-State institutions and serve as advocates for others and for better and more effective social programs. While the heart of the institution is its master’s degree programs for social work specialties, it also offers postgraduate degrees in fields like natural disaster management, labor studies, vocational education, human ecology, and habitat.

TISS’s enrolment in the 2021–2022 academic year was around 5,000, with about 1,900 undergraduates, over 2,800 students in two-year master’s degrees, and more than 1,000 doctoral students. More than half of the student population come from socially and economically constrained backgrounds, and about 20 percent of higher degree students receive financial aid from either the State or central government. A further 5 percent receive tuition subsidies from TISS or private sources.

Students are admitted through a nationwide merit-based selection process, and over 75 percent of all students come from “outside the State” where the different campuses are located, a measure of TISS’s national catchment area. International students comprise less than 2 percent of enrolments, which is about the same as most other publicly funded Indian universities. Dr. Parasuraman, who was director of TISS from 2004 to 2018, observed that “we have made our education accessible” in terms of place, price, and openness. TISS became more geographically accessible by expanding its network of campuses and centers across the nation and by holding “entrance tests in 138 locations across the country.” During his tenure as director, Parasuraman addressed other barriers to access by establishing a program for students from less privileged groups – referred to in official government

policy as “Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes” – to prepare them for the TISS entrance exam. This policy was highlighted in a memorial tribute by one of Parasuraman’s colleagues, who observed that “this Immensely benefited scores of first-generation learners” (Saini, 2022, p. 1).

TISS is also financially accessible. It has a need-blind admissions process supported by its Social Protection Office that “identifies students who need financial aid and channels support to them. So far there has never been an instance of turning down admission due to a student’s inability to pay the fees” (TISS, 2017, p. 21). According to one TISS dean we interviewed, “our fee structures are very, very modest compared to the universities which come up with huge fee structures – in Indian context.”

Even during COVID-19, TISS used its limited resources to ensure that the more vulnerable students, especially those in remote locations, could still access learning opportunities by shipping them laptops and peripherals and giving them stored-value cards to purchase internet access. But such support does not mean that TISS is an open-access institution. Admission is highly competitive, with about 60,000 applicants for its 1,300 undergraduate seats in any given year. TISS also adheres to national “reservation norms” by allocating places to individuals from specified social categories while still enrolling students from every region and State.

The institution today is distinguished by two intertwined themes: national identity and India’s stark social and economic inequities. Both themes have shaped one of its defining features – the field action project (FAP) curricular model. Further, these themes frame the way the institution overall gauges its success or impact.

NATIONAL IDENTITY

When TISS was founded, India was still a colonial State under “direct rule” from Britain, but burgeoning national movements were pressing for self-government and self-reliance. Mahatma Gandhi was advocating *swaraj* – self-rule – in all aspects of life, including education. This meant forgoing participation in British educational institutions and reducing dependence on British models of instruction. Gandhi’s advocacy for self-rule also encompassed a commitment to pursuing economic freedom for the most vulnerable and oppressed in the country and fostering their “capacity to regulate and control authority” (Gandhi, 1925, p. 41). This emphasis on self-reliance

pervaded Indian public policy for decades after independence, shaping national approaches to industrial development as well as validating a central planning approach to economic and social policy. It also shaped education policy (Varghese, 2015) by encouraging the development of national institutions and limiting the presence – and to some degree the influence – of foreign universities.

The emphasis on self-reliance and Gandhian principles of nonviolence, truth, and compassion and kindness influenced at least some of TISS's first students. Madhav Gore, who completed his postgraduate diploma in 1945 and later led TISS for twenty years as its director (1962–1982), was attracted by courses in sociology and thought that social work “might be something like Gandhiji's Constructive Work program” and an opportunity to do “rural work” (Gore, 2007, p. 111) by helping impoverished communities.

National self-reliance also bolstered the proposition that India had a distinct identity with its own strengths and needs. Both ideas were reflected in the initial program offerings of TISS and in many enduring elements of its institutional culture. The school was rooted in a place, in Mumbai and in India, where there were many different people facing every problem imaginable. It had the benefit of being in a location where students could learn from service and from experience.

The first director of the school, Dr. Clifford Manshardt (1936–1941), echoed these sentiments, arguing that while the school “maintained high academic standards,” it was “eminently practical” in recognizing the importance of the “cultural, economic and social conditions in India” (Manshardt, 1967, p. 87). As a consequence, TISS integrated the British and American approaches to social work education. The American emphasis on practice was joined with the philosophical background of the British, but without overlooking the importance of place and the realities of the lives of the people.

THE REALITIES OF INEQUITY

From its beginnings, there were vast differences between, on the one hand, the lives of the students and staff of the institute and, on the other hand, the populations that were the focus of their work and learning. Economic disparities and social distinctions abounded, reflecting the complexity of the nation. When TISS was established in the 1930s, the top 1 percent of the Indian population received about 20 percent of the national income (Chancel & Piketty, 2019), and while income disparity decreased during the

periods of industrial nationalization, it persisted and grew markedly from the mid 1980s. As of 2021, the Indian population in the “bottom half of the pyramid,” or around 400 million adults, received about 15 percent of the national income (Sennimalai & Sivakumar, 2021). Social distinctions were buttressed by the caste system, which was still operating legally when TISS was founded. All of this was compounded by low literacy rates; in the 1931 national census, only around 8 percent of the adult population was able to “write a letter and to read the answer to it” (Hunt, 1933, p. 324). In the 1930s, low-income populations had little access to family support, home security, and health services. Life expectancy in Mumbai at the time was around thirty-five years, an increase over the previous decade, as the Bombay bubonic plague, which killed millions in the late nineteenth century, had abated and sanitation had improved. The city had a severe housing shortage, with some 2 million rudimentary tenements with an average of four occupants (Roy & Das Gupta, 1995). This shortage of housing continued as the city’s population grew, and by the mid 1970s, nearly 3 million people were in “notified slums” and informal housing. Access to clean water in many communities was minimal, and many depended on commercial vendors that gave little attention to quality or reliability (Subbaraman et al., 2013).

The challenge for TISS has been to educate and equip young professionals – many of whom came from circumstances far removed from a life of uncertainty, ill-health, and hunger – even if they themselves are not from wealthy families. The very fact that they had completed a first degree and were seeking an advanced diploma distinguished them from their potential clients and cases who had little or no formal education. Few of the first intakes of students had any appreciation of the unrelenting grind of rural poverty or the limited infrastructure in the villages. The rural areas were home to over 80 percent of the national population up until the mid 1970s (Sarkar, 2020), but most of the emerging social work programs were in the rapidly growing urban areas where issues like “beggary, prostitution, juvenile delinquency” and dangerous industrial work needed “special attention” (Gore, 1988, p. 3). And the future of the nation depended, in part, on urban-based economic development that would sustain and support an independent, self-reliant, self-governing State.

Facing this conundrum, successive leaders of TISS have emphasized, refined, and reconceptualized the importance of “fieldwork” in a TISS education. To the present day, the institution encourages its students to immerse themselves in diverse communities and to engage, analyze, and learn from problems of practice in workplaces, households, welfare, health, and

voluntary organizations. TISS connects its students with life in rural villages and shows them some of the effects of child labor, human trafficking, and sexual predation. Community-based fieldwork also acts as an opportunity to test, appraise, and adjust models of practice and policies and approaches in use in developed economies.

THE EVOLUTION OF FIELDWORK AND FAPS

In a submission to be recognized as a national “Institution of Eminence,” TISS referred to fieldwork and the notion of “field action projects” as integral to professional education, which “have been part of the DNA of TISS since its inception in 1936” (TISS, 2017, p. 27). TISS was founded at a time when social work in India was moving away from amelioration, poor relief, and charitable hospitals to prevention (Mishra, 2021). TISS symbolized and promoted a “new social awareness” and attempted to translate “new ideas into action” (Manshardt, 1961, pp. 34–35). To foster this new approach, one of the requisites of the initial curriculum was fieldwork in a local social agency. This work was linked with a fieldwork seminar wherein the whole group would discuss problems and opportunities. But in the early years of TISS, fieldwork was not “fully developed” and did not take up much time in the academic year (Gore, 2007, p. 117). This allowed some of the students in the first cohorts to do paid work while studying, thus helping them to meet the costs of their education.

Relatively quickly the emphasis on immersion in the field evolved from an opportunity to link classroom activities with daily practice to include an emphasis on designing, testing, and evaluating new services or programs. As well as developing students’ professional skills, the fieldwork could and should inform government policies and assist community agencies to deliver services more effectively. This emphasis on developing and testing the efficacy of new approaches by designing them and delivering them in the field became a distinctive feature of TISS’s approach to professional education, usually referenced to as FAPs.

The first FAP was a children’s clinic attached to a Mumbai hospital, and it is still operating today. In the early years, fieldwork focused on urban problems, a “scientific approach in handling these problems,” and a shift in the “emphasis from mere relief to correction and/or rehabilitation” (Gore, 1988, p. 4). Through the decades, the nature of TISS fieldwork and FAPs evolved in response to circumstances and as the pursuit of national

self-reliance and self-determination deepened with national independence and economic diversification. Postcolonial India followed a welfare State model where social inclusion and social welfare were national concerns reflected in policies to protect and advance less privileged sectors of society. Preparing professionals to support, shape, and enact these policies required an approach that moved past the repertoire of skills drawn from clinical settings and “psycho-social intervention” (Dave et al., 2012, p. 454). The consequent emphasis on field realities continued to evolve as the field of social work developed. One influence was the emergence of specific domains like mental health and children in care in the United States. Another influence was the reformulation of case work to “addressing client need in depth” (Pierson, 2021, p. 135). Fieldwork was also a way to ground or contextualize Western approaches, adapt it to “Indian social conditions,” and lead TISS to move away from “generic patterns” of social work education. It created specializations like “criminology and correctional administration” and “labor welfare” in the late 1940s, well ahead of other Indian institutions (Dash, 2017, p. 68).

The emphasis on practice and immersion in local communities and workplaces ensured that students were not simply offered academic approaches that were incompatible with local conditions. Time “in the field” revealed the paucity of social infrastructure, the number of people in need and at risk, and the absence of public funds for even the most basic services like provision of clean water. It also illustrated the great diversity of beliefs and social behaviors in the local populations. All these factors forced a reappraisal and reinterpretation of conventional Western approaches to social work, which assumed the presence of communal infrastructure like water and sewerage systems. Gore, who as director of TISS (1962–1982) emphasized the importance of preparing young professionals for the realities of a diverse society, described TISS’s general approach to fieldwork. It was to be the antithesis to the prevailing practice in social work education that was unscientific and ignored the “social structural origins” of problems. Instead, TISS students were expected to focus on “identifying the causes of the problem” and seek a remedy (Gore, 1988, p. 4). Accordingly, most of the initial FAPs served vulnerable sections of the community and were sites of practice – places where policies and goals are translated into action.

Responding to regional and local circumstances also influenced the role that TISS takes on when large groups of people are caught up in political turmoil, like the sudden displacement of millions of people by the Partition of India and Pakistan, and numerous natural disasters like earthquakes and tsunamis. In 1948 the institute sent a relief team of students and faculty to

work in refugee camps in Delhi. This tradition of responding to human needs and natural disasters by sending relief teams continues. For example, TISS faculty and students worked in relief and rehabilitation on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands after an Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, as well as with those reduced to begging during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over time, as TISS grew and lengthened its relationships with different agencies, organizations, and employers, the focus of its social work education broadened from the problems of individuals to a “stronger community orientation,” especially among the “urban poor” (Gore, 1988, p. 5). This was reinforced by an increase in employment opportunities that came as nationalist State governments took office and created more development and welfare programs.

Social work education in India also shifted its emphasis postindependence in 1947. It struggled to address issues of scale with a rapidly growing urban population, vast rural areas, and tribal communities still underserved and in pressing need. And it tried to reconcile the differences between the proponents of “constructive” community work associated with Gandhian principles and American notions from the field of professional social work (Dash, 2017). By the 1960s there was also a push from the Indian University Grants Commission to ground social work and the education of professional social workers more deeply in the social sciences (Singh et al., 2011, p. 3). At TISS this move was led by Gore, who, having completed his master’s in sociology at the University of Mumbai and his doctorate at Columbia University in the United States, was appointed as director in 1962. This new emphasis on the social sciences was also incorporated into the institute’s constitution and prospectus when it became a degree-awarding, publicly funded deemed university. According to Gore’s recollections of this time, TISS would no longer solely be pursuing the “training of social workers” – it would be preparing “professionals in the application of social sciences to social service areas.” These social services would cover “education, health, housing, rehabilitation etc. and this broader focus would apply to the Institute’s research programs as well as the training it offered” (Gore, 2007, p. 293). According to a member of the current TISS leadership team, Gore felt that social work “should not just be confined about making services to people”; it was also about the “sociological and political processes” that shaped their conditions and needed to be “critiqued and reviewed” and changed. It was also about how to make social interventions more effective. This shift, by emphasizing the application of knowledge to social problems and programs, would also differentiate TISS from its new peers – universities that tended to overlook practice (Gore, 2007, p. 294).

In structural terms, the shift also resulted in the creation of research units, the first of which was the Child and Youth Research group.

The academic culture of TISS continued to evolve. The immediate past director and vice chancellor, who has been a member of the institute's faculty for thirty-five years, described the next stage as "we sort of moved towards applied social sciences, not just social work. Applied social sciences . . . there were functional disciplines . . . there were research unities and social scientists working really as researchers and then social workers teaching . . . doing research and social scientists doing research in social work." The additional disciplines and the interdisciplinary research work laid the basis for the next stage of academic evolution. By the early 2000s, according to TISS's recent director (2018–2023), Professor Shalini Bharat, "it was felt that we need to make a bigger impact in the general sector, and we need to become even more multidisciplinary." She observed that the faculty worked together to revisit TISS's vision and mission: "We started thinking how do we remain socially relevant? Are we connected to the current times and what does the country need? Are we making some kind of a visible impact or not and will be we counted among those who make a difference?" This translated into comprehensive and systematic explorations of themes like habitat, by drawing together practitioners and experts from disciplines like water policy, State regulation, sustainable agriculture, and technology. Director Bahrat commented that at TISS they approach "climate change and action from the social side and . . . water governance. We should look at urban governance. We should look at how cities are governed and to bring about a change in the way these issues are looked at in a very holistic and multidisciplinary fashion." Bahrat also suggested that this approach would further distinguish TISS from its peers, from universities that study these issues but do "not do the action part of it." It would also bring research to those groups in the community that "do the action part but do not have the knowledge around it or research built around it." Linking these intellectual approaches with the commitments to practical application and community engagement that are embedded in the FAPs delineated areas that TISS should "occupy" and where it should form partnerships to increase its impact. Successive directors commented on this theme, albeit five years apart. According to Professor Bharat, "We are partners to many – many processes which the government of India is taking up . . . bringing about water to people, having clean rivers, looking at climate change from a people's point of view."

Bharat's predecessor, Dr. Parasuraman, observed that "we work with every ministry, even the military." He continued by saying that over half the

institute's graduates "work with governments" at the central, State, and district levels with the rest working in hospitals. "We want them [TISS graduates] to be with the system and change it," said Parasuraman, but it is challenging because "educating officials and ministers is a continuous business." The partnerships also served as sites for fieldwork and sometimes led to or grew out of FAPs. The characteristics of FAPs have been refined over time, as TISS gained more experience in partnerships and as its national footprint diversified.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF FAPS

The importance of place is probably the most compelling distinguishing characteristic of FAPs. One former TISS director commented that fieldwork and the FAP process "allow us to demonstrate what's important" and "what works in our environment, not what works in America and Korea." And Professor Bharat described how fieldwork helps students engage with India, "with people and their problems" by "actually researching on these very social and contemporary themes and then taking it back to the field . . . I think, this is what makes our students very alive to issues and also look at issues from a very different angle. They are very . . . they're able to analyze problems in all their complexity." This theme of constructing programs that were relevant to local conditions and circumstances, and shaped by the principles of self-reliance and independence, was consistent with the Gandhian principles that shaped the fieldwork and immersion experiences of the first cohorts of students and guided the curricula developments of successive generations of TISS faculty. They also permeated the pedagogical approach of the institution.

FAPs and fieldwork shape the way teaching and learning are designed and delivered in TISS. They are not just student-centric experiences but pervade the institution's approach to learning. Director Bharat, drawing on her thirty-five years at TISS, commented:

There's also a way the pedagogy has always been blended – classroom learning blended with the field work outside. And field work need not just be a slum in formal settlement. It may be a corporate sector in industry. It might be a hospital setting. But the idea is that it gives students practical experience. Let them handle situations as they unfold in the real world. Look at situations, bring them back to do the case analysis or the cases are something they cannot relate to. So, students bring

back their cases with the faculty and individual case discussions or a group case discussion, they analyze – and this has been, for always, you know, part of TISS.

Bharat's views on the relationship between fieldwork and learning validate Janki Andharia's (2011) reflections on twenty years as a faculty member at TISS. Andharia was deeply immersed in fieldwork and saw it as a distinctive feature of the institution and its mission. This emphasis on place and immersion in the realities of the field is still evident in the weight given to community practice in TISS's master's degree programs and the specification of thirteen academic objectives for students active in the field. It is also marked by the intentional and explicit process that TISS uses to select "sites of practice," places where policies and goals are translated into action. The sites must also display an ability and readiness to critically interrogate the larger political and social environment.

According to Andharia (2011), the TISS approach to fieldwork also required the active and sustained engagement of faculty in "facilitating critical reflection and in demonstrating" good practice (p. 1102). Faculty members are expected to know and interact with the agencies that are sites of practice, maintaining a close supervisory relationship and encouraging students to be self-reflective in sharing their experiences in the field. These characteristics were referenced by current faculty and a recent director, who commented that FAPs and fieldwork "strengthened the pursuit" of TISS's mission. They were essentially "vocational educational models, on-the-job and apprenticeship models that helped young people develop practical skills in communication in advocacy, in capacity building." FAPs also offer opportunities for research that will improve practice, inform policy development, and generate evidence for reform and increased investment in social services. Fieldwork also captures and documents indigenous knowledge, which is very valuable, especially in the area of climate management and sustainable agriculture. It also fosters the further development of a literature that can support and sustain a "social work education indigenous to the culture, values, traditions (and even afflictions) afforded to the Indian population" (Singh et al., 2011, p. 5).

But FAPs are not static. They have evolved as social needs, and the enabling environment has changed. The commitment to serving marginalized groups has endured, as has the connection with professional education. They demonstrate proven and new interventions and processes and keep faculty connected with the reality of life in the nation's cities and villages. These qualities have contributed to the impact FAPs have had on social policies and practices in India.

GAUGING SUCCESS

There are numerous compelling instances of the impact FAPs have had on social conditions and social services in India. In addition to the important and significant contribution TISS faculty and students have made in crises and natural disasters, FAPs have been the source of innovations in the national social service infrastructure. One ready example is Childline 1098, a nationwide toll-free, twenty-four-hour-a-day telephone service for children in distress or at risk. It also has a physical presence at the district level and in transport hubs like bus and railway stations. The service was originated by a TISS student who later worked at TISS as a researcher. The director described how the student through her fieldwork found street children

to be really very vulnerable and something needed to be done. So . . . using field work methods and her social work training to ask them about their concerns, their anxieties, their problems. And one of the things . . . they wanted was there should be some way of finding out how to get help . . . as quickly as possible without others taking advantage of them.

The student had the idea of a dedicated phone number and asked the children what would be a good number to use, saying that “these are small children and they won’t have, you know, many of them are not schooled. And they just instinctively told her 10-9-8.”

Members of the TISS community have worked on reforming the punitive side of the law on public beggary and others on the nature and functioning of the penal system in different Indian States. TISS’s work on violence against women is often referenced as an example of the high impact FAPs have had. Professor Bharat, who saw the initiative unfold, recounted how in the 1980s domestic violence was regarded as a family matter, “not something the police can do anything about.” A TISS senior faculty member challenged this proposition, suggesting that what was needed was a different approach – one that was framed not as punitive but as supportive. The practical suggestion was to place a trained social worker at a designated desk in a police station to meet victims of domestic violence and liaise with the police officers. It was referenced in numerous conversations with Director Bharat, who commented that the initiative has been “picked up by at least four or five big states in the country where every police station has a social worker as a position. And where women can report their problems, bring their cases and so on.”

TISS has worked with the national judicial system on cases as diverse as suicides and tracking missing children (Halim, 2017). These examples and others that we learned about from our visits to Mumbai, Delhi, and elsewhere in India illustrate the different ways TISS has had a significant impact on national equity issues over the past forty years. TISS's contributions range from the conventional, like demonstration projects and project evaluations, to coconstruction of social policies and programs, to completing knowledge- and data-informed advocacy. These field engagements challenge some of the prevailing conceptions of what makes up a good university. As Director Bharat commented as she reflected on the history of TISS's FAPs:

How do you . . . I will not say the word “evaluate,” but how do [you] identify universities or higher education institutions which are actually part of what the government is doing? You know, in terms of programs or schemes or policies . . . Making some very, very important changes and contributing to governance and so on. So, I would think that that's not how impact is being studied or impact is being measured . . . how institutions should make a difference to society or to governance itself in any country. And that's, I think, one of the more important modern roles a university must play.

CONCLUSION

TISS occupies a singular place in Indian higher education and its array of universities and colleges. It differs through its emphasis on the social sciences and by the relatively large proportion of students pursuing graduate diplomas and degrees, more than 50 percent compared to 10 percent nationally. Former director Dr. Parasuraman claimed that “there is a uniqueness to this place – its capacities, its transformation power, its merit-based faculty. All that allows for us to be outward looking . . . and we are willing to take risks.”

TISS has benefited from both a continuity of leadership and a continuity of purpose. The heads of TISS have served for relatively long periods. Six of the nine directors served for five years or more, and most had deep connections with the institution as faculty, as researchers, and, in one case, as a student prior to their appointment as director. They and the current senior team share a deeply held commitment to help those who are less privileged by addressing the systemic causes of inequity. This sense of continuity of leadership and purpose was referred to by a TISS dean as a “legacy.” It was not so much a legacy of the Tata family trusts' aspirations for the institution

in 1936, but it was nested more in the notions of engagement and practice that characterize the institution and that are widely held by the academic community:

That's the legacy I'm talking about . . . it's a work that has gone on before us. And that's the legacy that we are continuing today. We have had some of the best scholars in the field who have worked with communities, worked with people, and have set trends around. And that's the legacy that we are referring to. When we are evolving, changing, they're also referring to that legacy.

The evolution of TISS's intellectual focus parallels Dash's account of the reframing of social work education in India. Dash (2017, p. 70ff) argued that social work education began with a "micro focus" on equipping professionals to engage in remediating the challenges facing individuals in urban areas. This was of limited value in a nation where only the basic needs of a large portion of the population were being met. A wider macro approach addressing the needs of vulnerable and marginalized sections of society was far more appropriate. This would extend to engaging with the State in the formulation of social policy and plans (Gore, 1983). Gore, both during and after his leadership of TISS, developed this theme. He argued that social work education for much of the first forty years after independence struggled with "a more basic problem in the social structure itself: the lack of continuity between rural life and urban life, rural occupations and urban populations" (1988, p. 8). Even when TISS became a deemed university in 1964, Gore and other faculty members worked to strengthen the emphasis on applying social sciences to real-world problems and addressing the structural challenges of poverty and exclusion in urban and rural settings (2007, pp. 293–294).

This shift to focusing on structural challenges took place over time, as the academic orientation of TISS broadened to be more grounded in the social sciences and, then, by embracing multidisciplinary. The shift was also reflected in the footprint of the university, which grew as it opened centers and regional campuses. But even as the institute's array of programs diversified, there was a core principle running through all of the new degrees and diplomas and the new fields of study – a commitment to advocacy and action to help others.

As these changes took place, TISS became even more engaged in all aspects of the public and social life of the country. The engaged role of the institute comes from its history and from its origins as an establishment that would address poverty and the country's great depression in the 1920s and 1930s. But

the nature of that engagement has changed, as the institute has become less involved in ameliorating the conditions of individuals and has placed more emphasis on addressing the systemic challenges. Former director Dr. Parasuraman noted that the institute was interested in addressing and shaping the future, not just being responsive to a central government or a funding body.

The institute has not been static in how it expresses its purpose. It has shifted its focus from producing social workers who are able to address immediate problems of poverty, to preparing its graduates to address the systemic issues at the root of national poverty, deprivation, and marginalization – citizens and community members ready to act at the front of the curve of change.