

Social side story

The Tata Institute of Social Sciences has been at the centre of the country's human development studies for over 70 years and continues to push the envelope through much-needed research and superlative education programmes

The word equitable, and its variants, punctuates the vocabulary of Prof S Parasuraman with as much frequency as maximums in a T20 cricket match.

The reason it does is indicative of the person he is, the worldview he articulates and the position he holds.

Prof Parasuraman is the director of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), a cradle of development studies, scholarship and research that ranks among India's finest educational establishments. More importantly, TISS is a bulwark of relevance that enlightens and defines the direction that social development takes in India.

TISS is about people and the primary question it addresses is this: how can education programmes, through training, teaching and research, contribute to a country and the ability of its people to live a dignified life. This means tackling issues of poverty, deprivation and discrimination, and it means moulding professionals who can understand and deal with conditions of development.

Beyond the 'traditional'

"Our vision is to continue to be an institution of excellence in education and in human development," says Prof Parasuraman. "We have constantly reinvented ourselves in order to protect, secure and funnel the rights and dignity of all people." With that lofty objective in place, TISS has restructured itself to expand the scope and shape of its programmes.

Going beyond traditional areas of teaching and research, the institute now has programmes in rural

development, urban planning and governance, and wealth creation among the poor. Prof Parasuraman says, "This means considering the poor not just as people who need welfare but as people with resources, who can be a part of the wealth-generation process."

Many of these new programmes have come about in the last four years or so, and the expansion has led to a corresponding increase in the number of students at the institute. "We had 390 students in 2004; now we have more than 1,500," says Prof Parasuraman. "Our faculty strength hasn't changed too much — we had 110 in 2004 and today we have around 140 — what has changed is the expansion of our postgraduate and doctoral programmes and the broadening of our research agenda."

This makes sense, given that the nature of the work that needs to be taken up in the field of human development is growing. "India is changing in a hurry and, in that context, we need to create professionals with a particular value framework," adds Prof Parasuraman. That should happen in a more substantive manner when TISS's centres in Hyderabad and Guwahati are started.

TISS does not see its people as individual faculty but, rather, as guides, as research leaders who can bring in MPhil and PhD scholars to work in particular areas. "We have initiated programmes where a number of research ideas can be explored by our faculty with the help of assistants and associates.

This translates into our professionals working with a larger group of doctoral fellows and a research team, and having a greater chance of contributing to the knowledge bank," explains Prof Parasuraman.





TISS has a library equipped with a good number of national and international journals



The TISS auditorium with state-of-the-art facilities is the venue for frequent symposiums and expert lectures

A partner for growth

The umbilical cord has been severed, but the institute's relationship with the Tata trusts, especially the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, is an important part of its history, its evolution and its growth. The trust being part of TISS's governing board — there are four trust members on it — is a vital component of this relationship. "These members bring a certain amount of understanding to the development agenda," says Prof Parasuraman. "There is an ideological kinship, a level of support and a sharing of the institute's vision of Indian society, its people, and their welfare and development."

A second feature of the trust's support comes through in the incubation of new ideas. TISS has been a place where innovative ideas are frequently generated. The government may not immediately transform these ideas into programmes or otherwise fund them. In many such situations, the trust has provided the initial backing, for example, in the institute's Prayas project, where it works with prison inmates. Once the programmes get entrenched, the University Grants Commission takes over the support function. Says Prof Parasuraman, "What the trust does is help get us started."

The professor calls the partnership with the trust "perfect", because it does not interfere with TISS's academic programmes: "The trust has been able to provide a kind of governance that balances the government's representation and influence. This is an ideal arrangement, and probably the best model you can get."

Lessons in research

A large part of the research work the institute does is in the fundamental fields of the social sciences, much of it is aimed at informing and influencing

government policies and programmes on development. "We operate in many ways, but we don't make much noise," says Prof Parasuraman. "We tend to think that noise-making is not the way to motivate or persuade the government."

Data and evidence are the currency that TISS uses to get its message across. "We do not set out to fight the government or individuals, and there is no particular ideological bent in the way we, as teachers, see the world," says Prof Parasuraman. "Our teaching should, ideally, provide all perspectives to students, all ideologies of development. It is, then, up to the students to analyse and to understand."

Despite the vitality of the research it does, TISS remains relatively low profile. Prof Parasuraman thinks he has the answer: "India has changed so much in the last 15-20 years. Growth at any cost and by any means — that has become the dominant discourse. The empathy that used to exist in civil society and public spaces for the poor has got eroded. Now poverty is seen as a condition that people bring upon themselves."

"Our media has been fundamentally transformed during this period, in the sense that the level of tolerance for alternate views has sunk. It's no coincidence that the link between the media, business and the military has become so strong in this time. The liberal space that existed 20 years ago has vanished; today you need to be sponsored to be published."

The way forward

Prof Parasuraman is convinced that TISS can be a knowledge leader for India and this corner of the world. "People talk about sustainable development, about a just and equitable society. These will remain empty words unless institutions like this craft a knowledge base of evidence through demonstration, through theoretical



The TISS campus is full of various hues of green

development. This is where we need to move forward and make a quantum jump.”

The other challenge for TISS is to survive, and thrive, in an environment where the state’s support for higher education shrinks. “State support for the creation of people-centred knowledge will dwindle as

the trend of privatising higher education spreads further,” says Prof Parasuraman. “India, with its enormous inequities in the access to quality education cannot afford this sort of privatisation, mainly because you then cut off a huge proportion of a largely poor population from critical streams of knowledge.”

One advantage the institute has is that it continues to attract quality talent. Prof Parasuraman says, “People believe this is a good place to come and work in. As for our students, they are among the cream of scholars; they don’t come here to study the social sciences because they could not become engineers.”

Prof Parasuraman is less than optimistic about the future course of development in India. “Growth is great, but growth by itself does not deliver equity; it does not translate into welfare for everybody. Every instrument of the Indian state is being driven by economic policy, devoid of any real understanding of our social reality. What we need to do is fashion a model that addresses the inequities that beset us, even while it provides for development.” TISS will have a critical, if small, part to play in shaping that model. ●

Philip Chacko



Tata Institute of Social Sciences: A fact file

- ▶ The institute was established in 1936 by Clifford Manshardt, an American missionary who pioneered several urban community programmes near Nagpada in Bombay in the 1920s.
- ▶ Mr Manshardt’s initiatives were supported by Dorabji Tata, the philanthropist son of Jamsetji Tata. The Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work, as the institute was then called, was initially housed in the premises of the Nagpada Neighbourhood House and Mr Manshardt was its first director.
- ▶ In 1944, the institute was renamed the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). In 1964, it was recognised as a deemed university by the University Grants Commission.
- ▶ The institute started by offering a postgraduate diploma in social work. In its first year of existence there were 400 applicants for the 20 seats on offer. Today, TISS has postgraduate and doctoral programmes in 12 different areas under the social sciences umbrella. It has more than 1,500 students and 140 teachers.
- ▶ The present campus of the institute, at Deonar in Mumbai, was opened in October 1954. Additionally, there is a rural campus in Tuljapur, near Solapur in Maharashtra, and centres are being set up in Hyderabad and Guwahati.
- ▶ The Sir Dorabji Tata Trust donates Rs10 lakh a year to the institute. Its more significant aid is in supporting programme development: it bestowed Rs10 crore to establish the disaster management programme and Rs4 crore for the media and cultural studies programme. The trust also contributed Rs25 crore to help establish TISS’s Tuljapur campus.