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India

Trupti Shah (1962-2016): Communist, Feminist, Human Rights Activist, Fighter for Environmental Justice

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -
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The movements for socialism, women's liberation, secularism, environmental rights, all suffered profoundly with the demise of Trupti Shah on 26th May evening.

Comrade Trupti had been suffering from lung cancer since 2014, and it had subsequently spread to other parts. Despite this killer attack, however, she continued to be involved in a range of activities. In 2015 March, when she was already diagnosed with lung cancer and under treatment, she was still active, for example, with the struggle of the people of Mithi Viridi against the proposed N-plant.

Born in 1962, Trupti was the daughter of Thakore Shah and Suryakanta Shah. Her mother was a social service activist. Thakore Shah was a Gandhian, the nature of whose Gandhism involved "not to tolerate any injustice", and which led him to Marxism, something recollected by Trupti, who attributed her own turn to Marxism partly due to this influence. He became an activist and later a leader in the Indian Section of the Fourth International.

In the 1970s, Gujarat witnessed a massive social struggles. Known as the Navnirman andolan (movement), this saw the radicalisation of many student youth activists. In Vadodara and elsewhere in the province, this also led to a small, but very committed group of activists coming into the Communist League, Indian Section of the Fourth International. Then just about 11, Trupti was influenced by some of these younger people, notably, as she would relate herself later on, Dr. Vibhuti Patel, who emerged as a dynamic young feminist and leader of the Trotskyist movement. Trupti herself was arrested for talking part in anti-price rise stors and kept in a remand home for juveniles for three days.

It was in 1980 that Trupti joined the Communist League, not because she had reluctance earlier, but because the CL leadership were not willing to give her membership till she completed 18. The present writer also joined CL in 1980, and met her late that year during a trip to Vadodara.

Women's Movement

The CL, and its successor, the Inquilabi Communist Sangathan, formed through the merger of CL and the Bolshevik Leninist Group, were both numerically small, but had a number of activist members who played, then as well as later, important roles in various social movements in India. Trupti was one of several feminist activists who were militant fighters of the CL and the ICS. During the countrywide agitations over the Mathrua Rape Case verdict, a forum named the Nari-shoshan Virodhi Samiti was created in Gujarat. Her experience in it was mixed. She had gone into it as a young woman, deeply shocked at the cases of rape and the role of state agencies in hushing up rape. Disillusioned by women from various political parties who were trying to gain clout within the Samiti, she turned to the autonomous women's groups. In 1980, she attended the conference of the Autonomous Women's Groups in Bombay. Inspired by the conference and contrasting it with how the Samiti in Vadodara was run, she made a commitment to forming an autonomous women's organisation in her hometown.

Between 1980 and 1984, Trupti was also involved in the running of a youth organisation named Manthan. In 1984, Sahiyar was set up, with students from M.S. University, Baroda playing a big role . For thirty-two years, it has continued working. In her write up for Zubaan's project, Poster Women, Trupti made a crucial point, in her usual soft, yet firm manner.

"The struggle to survive as a movement and not get trapped in institutionalisation as an NGO is difficult but not

impossible. While networking on issues at the state or the national level, we have experienced that the movement turned into projects and campaigns are constrained by funding. Young activists prefer to turn to well paid NGOs instead of movements. In such circumstances, we have been able to survive without big funding and FCRA for more than 25 years.... I feel we need to create a sustained platform where activists can gather beyond projects, beneficiaries, targets and lists of achievements or success stories to address the issues we feel are important and find out innovative ways to challenge the patriarchal system as interwoven with all forms of hierarchies without being constrained by the funding.”

In the years between the founding and the moment when this note of warning was sounded, Sahiyar would be engaged with various campaigns. A campaign over a rape of an adivasi woman led to her own deepening of understanding about the intersection between gender oppression and class and caste exploitations. This was in 1986. A decade later, in 1996, the Harivallabh Parikh rape case was seen as an important game changer, because the case came to be known by the name of the rapist rather than the victim.

Along with the campaigns against rape, there were campaigns against sex selection, campaigns against domestic violence, etc. And there were other sorts of work, for example the production in Gujarati of a multi volume book on Women’s History, in both Hindi and Gujarati. While this was incontestably a team work, Trupti was the soul of the project.

Communist Activist

It is easy, given the larger than life image that Trupti Shah has in the women’s movement in Vadodara, and her considerable presence in the autonomous women’s movement in India as a whole, to forget or downgrade her role as a communist activist in a small organisation. It would be totally wrong to do so, however. In the 1980s, the Fourth International had started International cadre training schools. Over a few years, the Communist League/Inquilabi Communist Sangathan was able to send three comrades , probably the first or second being Trupti. At that time it was a long programme, and Trupti, who had never been abroad till then, and who was a complete vegetarian on top of that, had serious problems with food. But as Penelope Duggan, one of the comrades associated for ages with the International’s schools, told us yesterday, “she was willing – although she had never eaten meat in her life – to accept non-vegetarian meals so that cooking would be less of a burden for the collectivity”. As it happened, when Trupti returned to India it was at Bombay that her flight came, for in those days there were few international flights at Ahmedabad. The ICS had a leadership meeting in Bombay, so I was able to meet her. Somewhat in a jocular tone, I told her, “now that you have been trained by the International leadership, we will expect more from you”. Totally serious, she replied, “Yes of course. I shall be thinking of immediately becoming a full time activist”.

In Vadodara, Trupti was to come in touch with Rohit Prajapati, a young activist in Manthan, who also joined the ICS and became a full time activist. Given the small size of the ICS, the notion of a full time activist was not that the ICS pays one a (however small) monthly amount, or something of that sort. It meant, in effect, Trupti and Rohit, who would also become companions, putting in time for the ICS, for several social movements and organisations, AND managing to get funds. Trupti’s mother was certainly a tremendous support for the work her daughter was doing. Along with this they would periodically work in various sectors. For Trupti, it was often part time teaching or research. She was connected to the Women’s Studies Research Centre, M.S. University, Baroda, between 1998 and 2001, and as a contractual lecturer in the Commerce Faculty of the same University for a decade, from 2001 to 2011.

Between 1991 and 2003, I was closely involved in the political work of the ICS along with Rohit and Trupti. Some of the issues in which they were involved included sustained anti communal and anti casteist work, much before Manuvad was a term known to many of the other sectors of the Indian left; support for the Narmada Bachao Andolan, support for the anti-nuclear activists of Mithi Virdi. At the time of the Baxi Commission recommendations, there were

massive upper caste violence, which quickly also turned into communal violence. From that time on, the ICS would take anti-communalism seriously, as a core component of its political agenda.

Comrades in Gujarat, including Trupti, Rohit, as well as some Bombay based comrades with Gujarat links, would collaborate in the caste battles as well. It was the Gujarat State Committee that came up with the arguments about why reservations must not be linked only to the former “untouchables”. At one ICS meeting it was Trupti who presented the main arguments. So when the Mandal report was implemented half a decade later, we were ready and able to relate to it immediately.

From the late 1980s, as the threat of communalism increased, the ICS was urging the bulk of the left to take it far more seriously. We had our own debates, with basically three positions emerging. Achin Vanaik felt that communalism should be understood in the Indian and present day context without reference to the fascism paradigm. Rohit, Trupti, the present writer and others would develop an argument about the relationship between fascism and communalism. And there would be an economic reductionist view, upheld by Magan Desai and some others. In 2002, when the pogroms broke in Vadodara, Trupti and Rohit were involved in sustained work. One of the things that stood out was their resistance to elite pressure concerning their residence. They lived, and still do, in Tandalja. It used to be a Muslim majority area with a significant Hindu minority. Over the years, as in Ahmedavbad, so here in Baroda, regular communal “incidents” have turned Tandalja into something like a 90% Muslim area. In and after 2002, Trupti and Rohit faced and beat down all pressures to make them move, as a conscious gesture that anti-communalism cannot be all theory, and public demonstrations, but also needs articulation through one’s own life and personal deeds.

However, their work led to unwarranted left wing attacks as well, with a small segment of people suggesting they were out to get personal applause. In fact, these attacks, connected also to the attempts to build proletarian environmentalism, as opposed to economic trade unionism, resulted in the split in the ICS in 2003, when first Rohit, then Trupti, Thakore Shah, and the West Bengal members all came out.

Since 2003, lacking a definite political organisation, Trupti and Rohit would often sign statements as “activists” etc. They were however involved in the process whereby Radical Socialist was created in 2008, and they also attended its first all India meeting of 2014, in which Trupti was one of the two comrades leading the discussion on women’s oppression and gender issues.

That was the last time I met Trupti. We had a discussion during a break, about how difficult it was to root out sexism even within the left. This was when the British SWP scandal had blown up, showing how sexism and rape apology can also find space within the left. Trupti argued that we needed firmness, but also patience. People around us were subjected to the social milieu. But if they went wrong we had to be clear that they were going wrong. This reminded me of how we had once gone wrong. At the 2001 ICS conference, we elected a leading team, where Soma Marik was brought in. Trupti was dropped. I argued that there was no need to drop Trupti. Why should there be an implicit feminist quota? But Trupti and Rohit kept silent, for understandable reasons. Certainly this was not sexual harassment. But this did show that an organisation could pay lip service to gender equality but not understand what it looked like in practice.

I would not like to end this part of my remarks on the above note though. That would make Trupti appear to be rather different from the person we knew. At one Conference of the ICS, she organized a Garba programme. During her stay for the Fourth International cadre school, she introduced many of her co-participants to Indian classical dance.

The Many Dimensions of Social Struggles

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Trupti was not one to keep her life into separate categories. She was a student of Economics and did her doctoral dissertation on "Economic Status of Women in Urban Informal Sector – A study of Baroda City". She also contributed an article, in collaboration with Bina Srinivasan, for a collection published by the International Institute for Research and Education. This dealt with capitalist development and violence on women.

From the days of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (whose offices and those of the ICS were at one stage in the same premises in Vadodara) to later, more recent times, she was also involved in environmental issues, relating them to capitalist exploitation and the burdens on women. In the last period, she was concerned with the the Statue of Unity project, the Garudeshwar Weir project and the recent Vishwamitri Riverfront Development project, questioning their impact on common people and the environment.

I had tried to write an obituary note. But this was writing about a friend of thirty six years. My trips to Baroda in the 21st Century have always meant staying with Trupti and Rohit. To add to that, she was younger than I am, and that made this a particularly difficult work. Trupti and Rohit were joined in their beliefs and their work. They worked to make people understand that the environmentalism was not a middle class fad about certain lifestyle issues. They were activists in the PUCL in Vadodara. In fact, there was hardly an event in Vadodara, or in much of Gujarat, where radical politics was being pursued and they were not to be found. The PUCL report on the Gujarat pogroms of 2002, for example, were very much to see their inputs.

It is not for nothing that the Narendra Modi government, and its successor government, were continuously after their blood. So much was the intensive surveillance on them, that when, some time back, I asked Rohit whether we should organise any fund collection drive for Trupti's treatment, his response was that if funds came in through banks, the people who made those transfers would be facing grilling from the police, and would find it difficult to prove that they had sent money only for her treatment. And since, on the other hand, neither Trupti nor he wanted to take a lot of cash without receipts, they would do without that money.

To Rohit, and to their son Manav, our heartfelt condolences. As long as human oppression and exploitation is being resisted, as long as women are facing violence, as long as caste-community oppression are persisting, the kind of political work Trupti Shah did will remain relevant, and her memory will compel us to continue along those lines.

Friday 27 May 2016

[1] [See other tributes at [Trupti Shah, a feminist fighter for the environment and social justice](#) and [Trupti Shah \(1962-2016\) : Remembering a Comrade and a Loving Sister](#)