

India - Trupti Shah (1962-2016) : Remembering a Comrade and a Loving Sister

Sunday 29 May 2016, by [MARIK Soma](#) (Date first published: 29 May 2016).

Trupti I don't whether this is an anecdote or how I saw in movements or how your smiling face and an ever optimism made me think positive.

Although I was involved in the autonomous women's movement from 1986, I met Trupti initially as a member of the Inquilabi Communist Sangathan in 1987 but not as a fellow comrade as I joined many years after. So my interactions started much later in the 1992 especially following the Babri Masjid destruction when anti-communalism became an important plank of our work, and then during the 1996 all India Workshop on Gender Just Laws, in which three of us went from Nari Nirjatan Pratirodh Mancha, while Trupti came from Sahiyar, that we came much closer. Over the last two decades, we had developed a close friendship.

What had struck me, right from the beginning, was the commitment which both Trupti and Rohit had. It is easy to sound like a fire breathing revolutionary for a short time. It is much more difficult to live one's entire life, much of it in an era of downturn of class struggle, as a committed revolutionary Marxist. And what was even more difficult was to lead the lifestyle they did. It is easy to mock at Gandhian styles, but when it is totally internalised with a Marxist politics, it provides a model which all of us may not be able to follow, but which can still be an example. I have often felt myself amazed at the cheerful way in which Trupti went about, not having large expectations regarding personal life and gains there, and committing herself to her work.

For a decade, she was working in the Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda, as a contractual lecturer. Every year she had to get a fresh appointment. And it meant a terrible class load for limited benefits. But she did not have personal grumbles. What was surprising to me was the ability she showed, in taking up work for Sahiyar, and for Pariyavaran Suraksha Samity other organisations, on top of all that. I would see her come back from work and immediately get into political work, or looking after Manav. Sitting in front of a computer keyboard and swiftly keying in a draft statement in Gujarati, or talking with people about a coming programme, or asking me to get up on her scooty to take me to the Sahiyar office - she would cheerfully move from one work to another.

The 2003 split in the Inquilabi Communist Sangathan left us with two choices - either create an organisation of the same time immediately, pretending that there had been nothing wrong but for a number of politically wrong persons, or to step back, work in the mass movements, and then think of how to rebuild. In Baroda, Rohit and Trupti started from scratch. Formally, a number of ICS members were with their political opponents. But they simply worked in the mass organisations and won in the movements. In the PUCL, they had been present all through, and indeed the charge was that they were not "using the PUCL for the political benefits of the ICS". In Sahiyar, Trupti was the central and dynamic leader. They were also working on environmental issues, as they had been from the time of the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

In 2006, we had a National Conference of Autonomous Women's Organisations. Trupti came to the Conference. We had a very fruitful conference, and this was followed up in 2007. Mira Roy and I had presented a plenary talk Women and the Left Front: Expectations Betrayed. In 2007, Trupti assisted us in publishing it in a pamphlet form, from Documentation and Study Centre for Action, Vadodara.

In political work, Trupti was never aggressive, and very optimistic for the long run. I have found these very attractive qualities, because I suffer both from an aggressive stance, and pessimism in course of organizing battles. After 2003, Rohit and Trupti always identified themselves as Human Rights Activists, Environmental activists, etc. There were possibly two reasons. The decades of Magan Desai's aggressive style of insisting on a flag hoisting style of Marxist politics perhaps made them unwilling to highlight a Marxist identity. And of course, the fact that for several years after 2003 there was no organisation to relate to. In the work they did, in taking up Hema Chemicals, or more generally environmental pollution, in taking up the struggles of the people of Mithi Viridi, in campaigning over the Statue of Unity, the Garudeswar Weir, etc, they were pushing a class point of view.

With so few people of committed Marxist politics, and with their own time going into so many social movements, building a political group did not come up very high on their agenda even after Radical Socialist was formed. But that was due, as Trupti once told me in a discussion, at least partly to the fact that as prominent activists in some of the organisations, they found it difficult to not present themselves as faces of the movement itself. But their work had a pluralist style which stems largely from the tradition of Trotskyism itself, which sees socialism as something not gifted from above but coming due to the struggle of toiling people for their own liberation. Because of this, a potential certainly exists in Gujarat for developing an alternative kind of revolutionary democratic socialism.

Rohit has been unwell for many years. Trupti would consistently take care of him, worry about his well being. And they were able to bring up Manav to be a good human being. Rohit too did the same with his illness when Trupti was fighting bravely with lung cancer. I remember many letters in which she made us feel positive by writing that the collective spirit and best wishes from all will help her to fight cancer. In 2014, I met Trupti for the last time when she came for the first national meeting of Radical Socialist. She and I made presentations at the session on women and gender. Subsequently Radical Socialist decided that there was a need for a detailed position paper/booklet, taking up the relation between women's liberation and Marxism, situated in the present day global context and looking at Marxist theory as well as Indian reality. The two of us were assigned the duty of writing this. Both of us were involved in various kinds of work, and this would be one project remaining unfulfilled.

Certainly it is an immense loss to human rights movements with a class angle but it is upto us whether we take up her unfinished work and make her dreams come true.

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