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India

Trupti Shah, a feminist fighter for the environment and social justice

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The women's movement, the environmental cause, the struggle for justice has lost a voice that never flinched from standing up for victims of exploitation, injustice and violence. Trupti Shah (54) left us on May 26, 2016 in Vadodara after a valiant battle against lung cancer.

Trupti, an economist by training, centered her lifelong activism primarily on women's issues, constantly drawing its intersections with development, environment, communal strife, caste, labour and human rights issues.

With parents, Thakorbhai Shah, a known labour union leader and mother Suryakanta Shah, active in public life, Trupti was drawn into people's struggles very early in her life.

Trupti always attributed her initiation into activism to her parents. In her own words, "I inherited the spirit, 'not to tolerate any injustice' from my father who left his career as journalist and Gandhian ideology to fight against injustice and became a Marxist-Trotskyist and Trade unionist. Along with him and other younger comrades from the Communist League, a Trotskyist group, I witnessed or participated in most of the major movements that emerged in Gujarat in the 1970s. My involvement in the women's movement has its roots in these experiences."

Her first experience of people's movement was in 1973 when she was just 11 years old. She, with five other girls, was detained in the state home of children for three days for participating with the elders in the anti-price rise movement that started in Vadodara to protest Rs. 1 hike in milk prices. She was soon to actively participate in the ensuing Nav Nirman Andolan and anti-Emergency movement. A product of Maharaja Sayajirao University's distinctive academic atmosphere from her kindergarten studies, Trupti was to plunge into the women's movement from her student days. And that turned into her lifelong passion.

As a young 18 year old, unlike most other Gujarati youth, she became active in the Communist League (CL), the Indian section of the Fourth International, which supported autonomous women's movement world over. Dr. Vibhuti Patel, one of the leading activists of the Communist League was to mentor Trupti's initiation in the autonomous women's movement. Dr. Neera Desai, a renowned sociologist and feminist, too was a major influence on Trupti's young mind and her work for women's rights.

When the nationwide movement for reopening the Mathura Rape Case seeking amendments in legal provisions related to rape was started, Trupti was a part of the forum, "Narishoshan Virodhi Samiti" (Committee to Resist Exploitation against Women) to be initiated in Vadodara. Disenchanted with the apathy of women political leaders towards gender-based violence, she participated as perhaps the youngest delegate in the first conference of Autonomous Women's Movement organised in Bombay in 1980. The proceedings sharpened the need in her to

start something afresh in Vadodara for women's rights. And so she resolved: "there is a need to have an autonomous women's organisation in Baroda which will uphold the interest of women above all other issues and political affiliation." And the rest of her life became a persistent effort towards building such an organisation. [1]

An effort of several years and like-minded friends resulted in Sahiyar (Stree Sangathan) an initiative led by the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda students in 1984. The overriding consciousness resulted in an organisation by women and for women with the long term aim to work towards a society free from inequality, injustice and atrocity - a society where women enjoy equal status and recognition as human beings. Resisting communal forces and fundamentalists of all hues, in striving to uphold the principles of equality and non-discrimination, soon became central to all Sahiyar's initiatives.

Sahiyar (Stree Sangathan) is a feminist group in Vadodara. She was one of its founder members. Sahiyar (Stree Sangathan) works for women's rights and strives to create awareness among society on women's issues. She was involved in awareness programmes like street theatre, organising workshops, training, participatory research and publication on behalf of the organisation. She was also involved in counseling of adolescent girls and women and providing legal support to them.

Her concerns were not limited to only women's issues. She brought gender perspective to other public concerns such as environment, civil liberties, human rights, anti-communalism and all just causes.

She had been involved with several social / voluntary organisations since her student days and undertook community work and social awareness work through these organisations.

One such organization being Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti (PSS), an organisation working on the issues related to environmental rights and awareness. As also a part of PSS, Trupti brought in her impeccable research and analytical skills and her understanding of human environment in identifying and studying the rampant environmental degradation and displacement of adivasis in the name of development for land grabbing and privatization. The concerns highlighted by her have found their expression in the changing environment over time, which only goes to showcase the depth of her understanding. Her thorough approach and holistic understanding of environmental issues, helped in preparation for legal action, an important aspect of her action-oriented approach.

She was also involved with People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), as well as the [Radical Socialist](#).

Trupti brought her expertise and sensitivities of women's rights to other struggles and every major social upheaval that she responded to – during the anti-Narmada dam agitation, the anti-nuclear protests at Mithivirdi area, the fight against industrial pollution in Gujarat, the 2002 Gujarat Carnage, the various government undertaken slum demolition drives, and

raised environmental concerns in Gujarat from time to time including in respect of the Statue of Unity project, Garudeshwar Weir project and the recent Vishwamitri Riverfront Development project, flagging the environmental violations, livelihood issue and damage being caused by the projects.

Her academic association with MSU continued simultaneously; in various capacities – as a researcher, teacher, and as academic coordinator with the Women's Studies Research Center and later in the faculty of commerce and faculty of social work as well.

She infused her academic expertise in her activism, translating it into action-oriented work at the grassroot level. Whether she was involved in preparing training manuals for NGOs, reviewing exercises, conducting training programmes, community programmes, she combined her academic brilliance with radical activism. She constantly flagged concerns and violations of all kinds with a rare passion.

She earned her Ph.D. for her thesis, "Economic Status of Women in Urban Informal Sector – A study of Baroda City" from MSU in 2000.

She continued to write extensively, with her unwavering faith in the collective women's movement. She took great satisfaction in the four part: *Nari Andolanno Itihas* (History of Women's Movement), a series of books on the history of women's movement in Gujarati, published by UNNATI and Sahiyar (Stree Sangathan) in 2011.

During her last days, she was most concerned about the violations in the Vishwamitri Riverfront Development Project case, especially related to the river's bio-diversity, environmental degradation, loss of livelihoods. Her concern to her last breath: *behno na adhikar ni vaat loko nathi sambhadta...nadi, Paryavaran ni vaat loko samjhe to saru* (People are apathetic to women's rights....it would be good if they understand the issue of river, environment).

She is survived by her fellow comrade, activist, friend and companion, Rohit Prajapati, who has been her partner in her efforts and pillar of support, and her son, Manav, amongst other family and friends.

[1] Trupti participated actively in this effort at the international level as well, notably as a member of the Fourth International Women's Commission and an important collaborator of the four month-long sessions devoted to the questions of women's liberation held in the International Institute for Research and Education in Amsterdam during the 1990s. **IVP**