

# In Memoriam

## A Tribute to Professor Sharit Bhowmik (1948–2016)<sup>1</sup>

*Indira Gartenberg, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India*

The day of 8 September 2016 marked the sad and untimely demise of Professor Sharit Bhowmik, an eminent Indian sociologist, activist and teacher. On the last day of a workshop on street vendors in Bangkok, he suddenly fell ill and was diagnosed with pneumonia. After fourteen days of battling for his life, Prof. Bhowmik passed away, leaving a gaping hole in the lives of many. We lost an intellectual, a labour rights advocate, a teacher and a fine human being.

Over three decades, Prof. Bhowmik's work traversed the tea plantations of North Bengal to the urban slums of India, while his teaching career travelled through the University of North Bengal, to the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) in Calcutta, Delhi University, Mumbai University and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai. Not only were his intellectual contributions to the Indian labour movement path-breaking, he was one of the few scholars who studied labour issues in sociology at a time when only economists dealt with the subjects of labour and poverty.

I first met Prof. Bhowmik in Mumbai University where I was pursuing my MA in Sociology from 2004–2006; I was among the last batch of students that he taught there. Each of his lectures was insightful – whether it was on the Sociology of Indian Society, the Informal Sector or Industrial Sociology. It was like getting a new pair of eyes, a fresh new approach to interpret the order of things in society, the way things worked. For him, sociological theories were not abstractions “out there” but rooted in our everyday experience, to be understood in their relevance to the world around us. As I would go on to understand over the next ten years of working closely with him, this quality of understanding the complexity in “the mundane and the everyday” made his approach to social issues – and therefore his research – unique. With that, he made sociology an approachable subject rather than an elitist domain. He dignified the human spirit by believing in the ingenuity and agency of all kinds of people, whether it was the working poor, slum children, his colleagues or his many students all over the world.

Everyone who knew him remembers him as a great conversationalist who was firm in his conviction and commitment to the emancipation of the disempowered, the oppressed and the voiceless. Not one for glossy terms, Prof. Bhowmik was someone who tended to “uncomplicate”. He would unpack complex theory by linking it to grassroots reality, and present it in a way that resonated with domestic workers in an urban slum, tea-plantation workers in a remote tribal area, factory workers in an auto assembly plant, high-level Indian Administrative Services officers, trade-union activists and with his many students. His research was rigorous yet written in a gracefully simple manner, attempting to reach a wide audience in multiple disciplines, making him both a

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this tribute was published in Sarker, K. (ed.) (2016) *The People's Professor: Reminiscences of Sharit K. Bhowmik*; Kolkata: Anustup.

scientist and an artist.

The impacts of his work were profound and touched the lives of the labouring masses all over India. For instance, his solid research on street vendors in the urban informal economy led him to become a part of the task force for the street vendors' bill, which successfully transformed into the landmark Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014. This was India's first legislation affirming the rights of street vendors. His seminal work in the plantations has been cited by every scholar venturing into a study of workers in the country's plantations, and his 2012 book *Industry, Labour and Society* is used as a textbook across India in nearly all social sciences Masters programmes, especially those dealing with labour.

I have learned a lot just by being around Prof. Bhowmik and hearing him speak on a diverse range of topics. I was fortunate to work with him as a researcher conducting studies on the informal economy, and was also his (last) PhD student; I was also the administrative coordinator for two initiatives that he spearheaded as the India head, namely the Global Labour University (GLU) and the International Center for Development and Decent Work (ICDD) at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Our excellent rapport over nine years of working together made it possible to undertake various research studies, trade-union action initiatives, stimulating conferences and workshops. In addition, I worked with him in the Labour Education and Research Network (LEARN), a labour NGO which he founded in the late 1990s to collectivise poor women workers in the urban informal economy. He conducted himself graciously among slum-dwellers, guiding them to develop their collective voice and assert their rights. His working style was participatory, and none of his decisions were ever forced or top-down. Instead, he encouraged the grassroots activists to create a vibrant, democratic environment for diverse opinions from a wide cross-section of people. Such an approach is neither fashionable nor common among several initiatives and organisations that attempt to "empower" the marginalised. His approach was innovative and therefore worked in different kinds of groups.

There were many high points in my long association with Prof. Bhowmik as he mentored me in TISS, in LEARN and in my life. He taught me many things by example, was selflessly interested in my growth and, unassuming as he was, never made a big deal about it. If a person was willing to learn, he had a world of knowledge and skills to share. He also had no qualms about mentioning his own challenges and limitations. If he did not know something about a particular subject area, he would openly say so – a marker of a true scholar and a fine human being. His humility, scholarship and sincerity towards his work, and his respectful treatment of people tells us a lot about his values.

My guru is gone. That makes me utterly disoriented. Whatever I am today, I owe it to Prof. Bhowmik. I was around to see him in his last days. In a strange way that comforted me because I got a chance to say my last goodbye to my teacher whom I respected and loved. The part that I miss the most is the thrill of discussing and developing ideas together, punctuated with his affable wit. The only way I can try to ensure he lives on is by following his teachings, and trying in my small way to help create the world that he dreamed of.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

INDIRA GARTENBERG is a PhD scholar at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, and a trade union activist in the LEARN Mahila Kamgar Sanghatana (LMKS, LEARN Women Workers Union) in India. Email: reva18@gmail.com