

Sharit K. Bhowmik: My Teacher, My Friend

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Sharit Bhowmik (SB) was my teacher at the Dept. of Sociology and Social Anthropology of North Bengal University, during my MA programme (1979-81). He taught us Political Sociology and Industrial Sociology. With his rare quality of keeping things simple and precise, Prof. Bhowmik could generate interest in students in whatever he taught by linking concepts with the lived reality.

His simplicity and down-to-earth approach led to a special bond of love and friendship with me that lasted until he crossed over. As his first research student, I found in him a supervisor who was “soft” and not overly critical of my work and writings and made me feel at home discussing my problems and difficulties.

Every time I visited Delhi he and, of course, Minakshi *boudi*, were by hosts, both in Patpadganj and CR Park. The three of us would chat until midnight. This continued until Sharitda shifted to Mumbai University. I was pursuing my PhD in Delhi School of Economics in the mid-1980s when Sharitda wanted me to teach at the NBU, the position he had left vacant, and extended all possible help in getting me there. It was indeed a privilege for me to teach the courses that he taught us. He offered appreciative and encouraging comments on whatever I wrote, possibly motivated more by his love for me than the inherent merit of my writings and recommended me to so many places and gave me countless opportunities that helped advance my academic career.

I see Sharitda as a man of immense wisdom, grounded in his approach in all relationships, with family and friends, who worked for the downtrodden with all conviction and empathy. He was a man with a bourgeois legacy yet totally declassed. He represented the family of garden owners and spent a lifetime fighting for the rights of the tea workers, the street vendors and the workers in the urban informal sector.

He had a life-long interest in working class movement, which includes movement of the tea garden workers, industrial workers in Mumbai, street vendors in Kolkata, informal sector workers in metropolitan cities and those in workers’ cooperative movement. He encouraged his research students to work on subjects of

relevance to the lives of the downtrodden, the oppressed and expressed his disgust with the late 1980s and 1990s trend – amongst the students of the Department of Sociology, Delhi University - of selecting abstract topics, unconnected to the life of the “common” people, for their research.

As a Marxist, he was conscious about the role of the “philosophers” in applying knowledge to change the course of history. His other activism apart, he was instrumental in forming a workers’ cooperative in Sonali Tea Garden in Dooars in the early 1980s. The tea workers in North Bengal had a special place in his life. He visited the region at least once a year, which was entirely our gain as we could meet him and Minakshi *boudi*. Every field trip to Dooars garden meant a visit to the North Bengal University campus, where his ex-students and friends, who lived close by, were privileged to be in his warm company.

We met on 15 July 2016 in the IGNOU guesthouse in Delhi for the last time. He attended the expert committee meeting on syllabus revision for IGNOU sociology courses for two days and he was about to leave for Delhi airport after lunch. Post lunch, the members of the committee came out to the open space in front of the guesthouse and stood in a row to bid him good bye and this turned out to be a prophetic good bye.

Thank you Sharitda for everything you have done for me, for the downtrodden and the discipline of Sociology. I will miss you badly all my life.