

Sharit Bhowmik as I knew him

Renana Jhabvala

SEWA

I met Sharit at a workshop on the informal sector twenty five years ago. I was immediately impressed with his wide knowledge, and even more by his commitment to working people, his bubbling personality. We have worked together and talked together in various ways and various forums since that time.

Sharit plunged deeply into whatever interested him, advocating vigorously for rights, researching into issues, committing his emotions and passions; and his causes were all causes for working people-tea-garden workers, street vendors, homebased workers, factory workers, slum dwellers. He believed deeply that organising was essential, but was willing to explore the best and most effective ways of organising.

After we met, Sharit became very interested in how SEWA was organising the most vulnerable, the informal women workers. He came to SEWA, met the women members, and in his observant way saw everything. He became a lifelong friend of SEWA writing many articles about SEWA's way of organising and successes. Being a communist, he often had arguments with his comrades, defending SEWA's positions and work.

Sharit's work was always for the cause, never for himself. He did not use his talents to make money and always lived a simple life in a small house provided by the University where he taught. His high credibility was due to his simple middle class lifestyle with his wife Meenakshi and their son. Sharit's warm personality and inquiring mind attracted many visitors, who were quietly welcomed by Meenakshi. There was always an open house welcoming whoever came, offering shelter and food and conversation.

Sharit is one of the most vocal and passionate advocates for street vendors. The first authoritative research on street vendors was done by him while he was still teaching in Mumbai University. Globalization had begun to sweep street vendors aside in urban areas, there was a spate of vendor suicides... something had to be done. In the globalization and growth euphoria the street vendors, like most of the urban working poor, had become invisible both in the policy sphere and in the political sphere. Arbind Singh, a young lawyer, had just committed himself to building a network of street vendors to influence national policy. Manali Shah was heading SEWA's efforts to organise street vendors. So the three of us approached Sharit and asked him to undertake a study which would be both qualitative and quantitative and which would document the issues of urban street vendors. He agreed without hesitation although, he was teaching full time and it was a huge task which had never been done before.

This study was a process of discovery for all of us, it revealed the numbers of street vendors in India, it highlighted their low earnings, their insecure work, their exposure to violence, their lack of opportunities. It also brought out how much they contributed to the city's economy, their contribution to solving the employment problem, their support of low income populations, through good but cheap products. It was a path breaking report, which opened the eyes of policy makers and many of the general public.

But Sharit's advocacy went far beyond research. He began working with the vendors organizations, especially in Mumbai and Kolkata. He became the bridge between the organizations and the city authorities, between the vendors and the consumers, between the city planners and the vendors' networks. He amplified the vendors voice by writing in newspapers, attending civil society meetings, arguing with municipal authorities.

Due to SEWA's efforts the National Government formed a committee to formulate a national policy for street vendors. I can say unhesitatingly that Sharit who was a member of the committee, almost single-handedly wrote the national Policy using his seminal study as the basis. The National Policy later became the basis for the Law to protect the livelihood of Street vendors, and so Sharit will live on through many generations of grateful street vendors.

Sharit's writing and research were deep, innovative and eminently readable. I often argued with him, saying he should be writing more, I said that he enjoyed conversation more than writing... he would agree with me and then go back to talking! How often I have harassed him to finish a piece of writing or to start a new one, but he was usually busy with his activism, his many academic responsibilities, his networking on behalf of the causes he believed in.

For all his close contacts with the grass roots, Sharit had an international presence. Witness his articles in reputed international journals, his presence as Chair in well known universities, his speeches in international conferences. He was my colleague in WIEGO the international network for informal workers, and the leader in India for the Global Labour University.

I did not meet Sharit often, but occasionally I would hear his voice speak in my head, I would come unexpectedly across something he had written, I would meet someone who talked about him. I shall miss him terribly, and yet I will continue to hear him in my mind, read his writings, talk about him...his voice and writings and personality will remain evergreen. A passionate, intellectual, active life lived for others will make itself felt through many generations.