

Obituary

Sharit Bhowmik

Sociologist, teacher, labour activist and friend



Sharit Bhowmik, sociologist well known for his studies in labour and especially on the informal sector, passed away last night in Bangkok. He was in a coma for some time, having collapsed as complication of undiagnosed pneumonia in his hotel room. His wife and partner Meenakshi and his family were with him.

Bhowmik received his MA from Mumbai university and earned his doctorate from the Delhi University. His early work was on plantation labour in West Bengal. Subsequently he consolidated his work in the area of labour studies focusing on informal labour and labour rights. Ever an activist, Sharit's scholarly positions on labour issues never wavered. He interacted closely with workers' leaders and was never an 'outsider' in its sociological sense, to workers organisations, their core issues and the movement. He wrote extensively on workers' cooperatives and workers' organisations. While a supporter of the working class causes, he was also sharply critical of the functioning of trade unions, especially in recent times.

His career spanned a number of universities and institutions: He retired from the School of Labour and Management Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. Before that he was at the Department of Sociology, University of Mumbai; Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi; Indian Institute of Management Calcutta; University of North Bengal, Darjeeling District, West Bengal. Currently he was National Fellow with the Indian Council for Social Sciences.

His most important work, both in the scholarly world and as an activist, was his massive contribution to and leadership in the formalisation of a policy on street vendors, which came about as a follow-through of his work on informal labour which began at a time when few labour scholars were focusing on this sector.

Sharit wrote extensively, both in the academic press and in the media. For a time he coedited with Professor Datta, the Labour Studies supplement of the *Economic and Political Weekly*. He had no hesitation in calling a spade a spade regardless of the fallout that it may prompt. Because of this, he was highly respected by his peers and labour leaders and activists, across the spectrum. Regardless of affiliations, he was always available to political, social and civil society activists.

A condolence meeting is being organised today at the TISS, where he was professor emeritus.

Sharit was, more than anything else, a role model of a new generation sociologist who combined activism and scholarship seamlessly and effectively. He is mourned by his many students, whom he nurtured actively and sustainedly through their early careers; his colleagues and fellow workers who shared his space and vision, by the vast numbers of labour activists and workers whom he befriended and worked alongside. He will be sorely missed, especially in an environment that needs the broad-based, progressive vision, scholarship and activism of those like Sharit Bhowmik.

-Editors, *eSocialSciences*