

Sonal Shukla
(1941-2021)



A Tribute
Vibhuti Patel
Feminist Activist

Sonal Shukla, a veteran feminist passed away on September 9, 2021. She was a close family friend, co-traveller in the women's movement, role model and a feminist icon for my daughter and thousands of young girls and women. She was humble and humorous, witty and warm. She had a zest for life and was actively involved in the solidarity work for local as well as global efforts of the women's rights movement.

In the online memorial meeting organised in a short span of two days, more than 350 participants of Sonalben, as she was popularly known, from various social movements were present for four hours. More than 60 participants shared their experiences with Sonalben in the

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cultural women's, literary fora, feminist groups, campaign against violence against girls and women, educational programmes, youth camps, tribal struggles, environmental movement, industrial workers struggles and solidarity for Dalit survivors of casteist violence. The meeting was full of nostalgia with heart-warming testimonies by all those whose lives Sonalben had touched, recitation of her favourite poem, 'I am a dangerous woman' and optimistic songs on empowerment of girls, clip from film by Paromita Vohra on VACHA women's library.

Multifaceted Persona

She came from a family of artists and found cultural idiom most powerful to reach out to the communities of students, youth and the girls at the margin of society. She promoted intersectional feminist perspective in her writings as a columnist in two Gujarati newspapers. One column was devoted to her analysis with gender lens on the contemporary events and issues and the other comprised her reflections on creative expressions such as poems, stories, films and craft.

Sonal was an excellent story teller and had a unique skill to established rapport with persons with any socioeconomic and cultural background. She could interact with ease on the most complex theoretical issues with anyone- right from home-makers, students, academicians and media persons. She was always upfront in expressing her views, both in her writings as well as in her speeches, radio programmes for All India Radio and Doordarshan.

The two of us made a very good team, as co-panelists, co-singers, co-editors of a quarterly journal Quest in Education and Nari Mukti in Gujarati (along with Dr. Neera Desai). We organised innumerable workshops, symposia, national conventions, conferences and seminars on Girls and Girlhoods with a concrete action agenda.

Right from the post emergency period, Sonal had been active in the autonomous women's groups and housed the first feminist newsletter (1978-1980), cultural subcommittee of Forum Against Oppression of Women (1981-82) for campaign building, Women's Centre (1982-1984) to provide institutional support to women survivors of violence, Vacha Study Circle (1986-1990) to discuss feminist writings. Sonal registered VACHA in 1990 as a trust.

Death, destruction and devastation during communal riots in 1992-93 shook Sonal and she got involved in the relief operations. After Bombay Riots, she decided to devote her life to strive for nurture young minds with secular humanism. In this effort, Sonal was actively supported by several professionally competent women as volunteers. Prof. Dineshwari Thonse, Mrs. Kumud Shanbag, Prof. Nina Haeems and Prof. Vrijendra, media personality Nischint Hora and theatre artist Utkarsh Majumdar, Sonal's brother Uday Majumdar (Music Director) and sister Meenal Patel (actress) whole-heartedly supported VACHA in creation of cultural resources such as documentary films, audio cassette of feminist songs in Gujarati and Hindi. Under Sonal's visionary leadership, VACHA channelised collective energy in empowerment of poorest of the poor adolescent girls in 18 bustees (communities) in Mumbai through education, skill training and exposure programmes along with focus on livelihood issues. VACHA's personality development programmes were marked by message of empowerment, self-care,

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recreation and importance of education. While counselling women survivors of violence, girls facing constraints and housewives facing restrictions, she would always share her experiences and convince them not only to set high goals but also achieve those goals with the support of feminist sisters. In this heroic journey, her co-travellers were feminists Swatija Manorama, Anju Jani, Darshana Joshi, Medhavinee Nanjoshi and Amrita De.

Sonalben's best qualities was her sense of humour, sharp wit, magnificent and enchanting personality and command over languages- Gujarati, Hindi and English. She was a brilliant and erudite orator. Her caustic remarks at times brought sharp reaction, but it also brought transformative changes in the mindset. She was well-known among social activists as a comrade in need and always very hospitable. She shared her intellectual and material resources with utmost generosity. She lived for others- her friends, her students and members of the organisations with which she was associated. Wherever she went, she made everyone laugh with her unique sense of humour based on her immediate observations, anecdotes with cross section of people, choice of the most effective words-terminologies and phrases, naughtiness and spirited laughter even in the midst of difficult circumstances

Sonal visualised Vacha as a women's group involved in social research and action. Vacha started with a women's library and since has developed several community based programmes dealing with research, documentation and training, a children's centre, and a cultural centre. The VACHA library maintained a collections of serious books, fiction and documents on women's issues. Since most available written material on women's issues is in English, Vacha also collects, creates, and disseminates cultural resources such as songs, skits, audio and video material concerning women's rights. Vacha collective is composed of a group of women with varied backgrounds such as social activism, community work, media, research, management, law, writing, finance, teaching and training.

Just a week before her demise, Sonalben visited us at our home and spent 3 hours taking optimistically about VACHA girls. She said, "The adolescent girls are surpassing earlier milestones in the area of education, vocation, sports and cultural activities by displaying tremendous grit and hard work. They are setting new benchmarks in their success stories in spite of socio-economic and cultural hurdles. Now the state and civil society need to remove the institutional and cultural constraints so that the adolescent girls can realise their dreams. Providing good and healthy role models for adolescent girls is very important. Let the Girls Bloom. They are the future of this planet." She was full of praise of the current leadership of VACHA directed by Dineshwari Thonse, Yagna Parma, Steffi Fernando and Rupali Pethkar.

Magnificent Work and Awe-inspiring Legacy

Sonal was a great giver and lived for others. On March 8, 2021, Sonal was awarded ‘An icon of the Women’s movement in India and across the globe!’ under the banner of Gender Icon Award instituted by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), India. On the same day, Graphic Novel, penned by veteran feminist journalist Jyoti Punwani and illustrated by Sharad Sharma, capturing milestones of Sonal’s life was released in social media for free downloads. Currently that this FES publication has gone viral.

Sonal has left a glorious legacy by mentoring 100s of young girls who are working with honesty of purpose and feminist vision even in the midst of COVID19 pandemic. Till the end Sonal was continuously in touch with the VACHA team to guide its education programme and relief operations such as distribution of ration kits, sanitary material, computers for online education under the lockdown. Sonal’s quest for participatory democracy was crystalised in VACHA’s motto, “Nothing about us, without us and nothing about girls without girls”.

Readings

Sonal Shukla (2021) An icon of the Women’s movement in India and across the globe!

https://india.fes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Gender_Icons_-_individual_-_India.pdf

Books, pamphlets, Newsletters, songs, films by VACHA: <https://vacha.org.in/resources>.