

In Memorium: Ramnika Gupta (1930-2019)

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Ramnika Gupta, one of the most well known faces of contemporary Hindi writing, passed away in March 2019. Along with the loss of Archana Verma, Krishna Sobti and Namwar Singh—Ramnika Gupta is the fourth major casualty of Hindi literature this year. And the year

has just begun! Ramnika was not only a distinguished writer but also a staunch advocate of social equality. She was a life-long passionate spokesperson for the rights of adivasis, dalits, women and the minorities in India. As an organizer and literary activist of the downtrodden, Ramnika's scheme of things were quite inclusive in character and spirit. In these times of 'sectarian' identity politics, she still believed in the unity of subalterns and much like Jyotirao Phule, attempted to organize the *streeshudraatishudra* (women, dalits, adivasis, obc's and minorities—in our contemporary vocabulary) as one single category. She could well have been one of the last remaining liberal-humanists of our times.

In our lives, very few people impress us; make us envious both by their skills and commitments. They expose our human frailties and at the same time comfort us with their genuine human touch. And while doing all this—they claim no angelic status. In their company, we want to challenge ourselves a little bit more; we want to generate the meaning of our lives beyond us. Ramnika Gupta was one such person. All of us who knew her, spent time with her somehow felt hopeful and liberated in her presence.

I have two enduring memories of Ramnika Gupta as a lively, compassionate, empathetic human being and a committed writer who



wanted to change society's attitude for its own good. In those days, I was a doctoral student at The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad. Before my joining in 2010, the university had added a new department by the name, Department of Hindi and India Studies. Most of the students in this new department were from the non-Hindi speaking regions and marginal social backgrounds. With someone's reference, they had got in touch with Ramnika Gupta who in return had invited all of them to Rajasthan. There, she was organizing an event on adivasi literature. Though not from Hindi literature, I too joined the touring party to Rajasthan. She met all of us with ease and was very happy that she got people to represent the 'south' in her seminar—a tribute to her inclusive thinking. My Hindi literature friends introduced me to her during the lunch break. When she came to know that I am a student of English literature, she showered her 'extra' attention on me. I realized later that this was a trademark quality of Ramnika Gupta. Whoever came into touch with her, especially from the younger generation—were potential foot soldiers for her literary and social mission. She immediately offered me to associate with some of her foundation's ongoing projects of translation from Hindi to English and vice-versa. On getting to know that I am working on gendered violence for my Ph.D work, she almost commanded me to read her long story "Daag Diya Sach" (The Funeral of Truth) as a potential material for research.

Ramnika Gupta was a woman of life and combativeness. All her life she had been involved in charged political and literary struggles. On a number of occasions, she was beaten by police; jailed for being against state policies. Extremely bold with her writings and public dealings, Ramnika lived a life dedicated to society and in later years, her personal and political life got subsumed into one another. She spoke nostalgically about her journey during that first interaction. She accepted that she had made mistakes in her life and she had learnt from them. On a personal front, she had been fighting a lot of bodily ailments all her life but the spirited woman that she was, rose every single time, with renewed vigour and strength. In her late seventies during our first meeting, Ramnika was not at all content with what she had achieved in life. There was a hard to miss restlessness in her. Perhaps, she wanted to live another life in her current life. However, there was no bitterness in her, no contempt for the people she had known. At the risk of sounding paradoxical, I found that Ramnika remained restless all her life but extraordinarily hopeful. Hopeful for a better tomorrow.

My other memory is that of the long personal interaction that I had with Ramnika in 2014. In those days, I was attempting to translate her story "Daag

Diya Sach" and was facing a lot of problems. On being told so, she invited me to her home in Delhi where I stayed almost a week. As we interacted about her life and work, it became clearer to me that her journey could be divided into two historical time-frames and individuals. The first phase belongs to the period between the 70s and the 90s where she stayed in Hazaribag, now in Jharkhand, then in Bihar. Born on April 22, 1930 in Sunaam (Punjab), Ramnika's arrival in Bihar wasn't a coincidence either. It was a statement of dissent against the prevailing orthodoxies of her times. She had done an inter-caste marriage against the wishes of her family and had made Bihar her new home to stay away from the resultant flak. During her time in Dhanbad and Hazaribag, Ramnika grew as an independent individual by aligning with various people's movements. With an ideological affiliation to the left, the early part of this phase was spent in leading trade unions, farmers' movements and so on. During the same phase, Ramnika entered active politics and was elected as an M.L.A. to the Bihar Assembly. However, notwithstanding her new role of a lawmaker, she continued to give more importance to the welfare of the marginalized than to the cadre politics of her political affiliations. This could have been the possible reason that until she was part of active politics she continued to juggle between the socialists, communists, the Congress and even Arya Samaj, possibly to find out whose temperament is better suited to her brand of politics. Eventually, none seems to have offered her a permanent alternative.

During her stay in Bihar, Ramnika Gupta founded the *Yuddhrat Aam Aadmi* (The Battling Common Man) magazine that went on to achieve a cult status in Hindi literature and still enjoys a very healthy circulation. During our conversation, she informed me that the period of late the 70s and the early 80s was a very volatile one in Indian society, which was at loggerheads with caste, religion, localism, class etc. The establishment of *Yuddhrat* was a response to highlight those who were left out from the ongoing debates, especially adivasis, dalits and women among others. The purpose of the magazine can also be understood from its signature statement, available on its website:

They, the resourceful
 They, the powerful
 They, the intelligent
 Are not so
 Till the man
 At the lowest rung of society
 Is deprived and rendered
 Poor,
 Weak and
 Illiterate.

The quarterly appearance of *Yuddhrat* also attempts to establish a chord with the intellectual class besides giving creative opportunities to a host of new writers. I noted that it had almost become a part of Ramnika's policy to invite people to write for the magazine. She would always keep track of literary talents in other Indian languages and would promote their visibility through translation. When one looks at the back issues of *Yuddhrat*, it is not difficult to ascertain that the magazine itself has undergone a massive inclusive trajectory. If its initial issues were focussed on the problems of trade unions, workers and daily wage labourers, there was also a phase when the magazine was completely dominated by dalit writers. And in the later phase, the magazine gave immense visibility to the adivasi writers and their issues. Through its pages, *Yuddhrat* attempted to tap the adivasi movements and their negotiations for *jal* (water), *jungle* (forest) and *jameen* (land).

According to Ramnika Gupta, the adivasi turn in the magazine attempts to mobilize India's public opinion towards the problems of its indigenous people. Here, adivasi literature is understood as a vehicle to map the adivasi social movement. Meanwhile, the magazine also kept on bringing out special numbers on other diverse issues as well. Notable among them are: *Lokbhasha* (Indigenous/tribal Languages, 1995), *Laghu Patrikaye* (Little Magazines, 1995), *Dalit Chetna* (Dalit Consciousness, 1996), *Adivasi Swar* (The Literary Traditions of Adivasis, 2002), *Poorvottar ke Adivasi Swar* (Tribal literature from the North-East, 2005), *Mal-Mutra Dhota Bharat* (The Struggling Sanitary Keepers of India) and so on. Ramnika commissioned quite a few special issues in which the adivasi, dalit and women's literature from other regional Indian languages was made available in Hindi. The women's issues were titled *Haashiye Ulanghti Stree* (Women Crossing the Periphery, 2011, 2013). These issues became massively popular with students and created ripples in the scholarly corridors.

In the 90s, Ramnika Gupta shifted to Delhi and remained there till her death. It was a period of consolidation in terms of a writer as well as an organizer. Almost two dozens of her own creative works got published during this phase which included poetry collections, novels, story collections, a travelogue and the massively talked about series of autobiographies. I shall come back to some of them a little later. Meanwhile, in 1995 Ramnika started the Ramnika Foundation. She had a great fascination for her own name and for herself. On being asked, wasn't it strange that she started her Foundation on her own name, her response was clear: "The first condition to love others is to love yourself first." Nevertheless, she was quite certain about the role of the Foundation. According to her, "the Foundation was formed to provide a

platform for the unheard voices of the downtrodden sections of the society, including tribals, dalits, women and other Indian minorities. The aim of the Foundation is to bring them into the national mainstream through social mobilization, literature, art and culture and to strive to build a new social order based on social justice, rational and logical thinking, pragmatism and a scientific outlook."

Another important area of focus for the Foundation is to develop leadership qualities among its target communities. In order to facilitate it, it was resolved that 75% of the active members would be from marginal communities whereas the rest would be constituted by other liberals. The Foundation has also translated this co-operative participation onto the practical field by organizing a number of workshops, capacity building programmes, seminars and publishing books/documents/pamphlets that have made historical interventions for the people in the margins, especially the adivasis. A few notable ones are: *Adivasi Lok* (Adivasi People, 2006), *Unki Jeejivisha, Unka Sangharsh* (Their Resolve, Their Struggle, 2006), *Bharat ke Adivasi Lekhak* (The Adivasi Writers of India, 2006), *Adivasi Sahitya Yatra* (The Adivasi Literary Journey, 2008/2011), *Adivasi Kaun?* (Who are the Adivasis? 2008/2011), *Santhali Bhasha ka Vagyanik Adhyayan* (The Scientific Study of the Santhali Language, 2011), *Adivasi Asmita ki Padtaal Karte Sakshatkaar* (The Interrogating Interviews of Adivasi Identity, 2012) and *Adivasi Srijan Mithak evam Lok Kathaye* (Adivasi Creative Myths and Folk Tales, 2015). Ramnika Gupta has edited most of these books and they can be freely accessed in full from the Foundation's website. Sequentially, another significant intervention of Ramnika Foundation is the establishment of All India Tribal Literary Forum (AITLF) and its subsequent chapters in both South and North-East India. AITLF was formed on the recommendation of Mahasweta Devi and since its inception has been quite instrumental in bringing different tribal writers together on a single platform. It has also been giving literary awards to both the emerging and established tribal writers from time to time.

As a writer, Ramnika Gupta follows the track laid out by the realists. She wrote what she lived. During her interactions, she always maintained that the role of literature is to make us uncomfortable. It should be able to hit us hard, change our attitude. In that respect, she invested in the human capital and envisioned literature as a utilitarian device. But the problem with her brand of writing is that it is too self-explanatory and leaves nothing for the readers' intervention. The themes of her literary works, again, originate from her social consciousness. For instance, her poems reflect a unique kind of tenacity for freedom-freedom of various sorts, especially for the subjugated persona

of women. Long before the eco-feminist style sheet got introduced into Hindi literary circles, Ramnika was talking about *Prakriti Yuddhrat Hai* (The Nature is at War, 1988)—combining love for nature, politics and the people's movement for egalitarianism. Her *Main Aazad Hui Hoon* (I Feel Liberated, 1998) contextualizes the feminist intent of freedom from the clutches of enslaving patriarchy. The autonomy of body and sexuality becomes important signposts to challenge and combat the ruling patriarchy in this collection. On the other hand, *Paatiyan Prem Ki* (The Chords of Love, 2006) formulates new definitions of love bereft of any commitment. For example, in *Paatiyan* she says—‘*Mai jisse prem karti hun, main chahati hun ki wah mukt rahe, yahan tak ki mujse bhee*’ (Whomsoever I love, it is my wish that he remains free—even from me). At the technical level, her poems, due to their prosaic form, usually turn into plain statements. However, she has written poems in *Maithili* as well, which to my mind seem comparatively more beautiful than their Hindi counterparts.

On the other hand, the genre of fiction seems more suited to her brand of writing. Her novel(s) *Sita/Mausi*, first published in 1996 are basically two tribal novels clubbed into one. Both the novels attempt a poignant and heart-rendering tale of adivasi society in transition. A transition which is neither natural nor heralded by the adivasis. It is, in fact, an onslaught of globalization unleashed by the psyche of urban man into the jungle. This assault on adivasi society and culture is breaking its fabric and forcing tribal women like Sita and Mausi to fight tooth and nail to save their identities and in the process also those of their societies.

Her short story collection titled *Bahu Juthai* (The Used Wife), first published in 1998, created a lot of controversy in Hindi literary circles. The eleven stories in the collection are based on women characters coming from adivasi and dalit communities—mostly adivasis. The locale of these stories is *Chotanagpur* (now Jharkhand), a predominantly tribal land and the hotbed of coal mines. *Bahu Juthai* is the coming of age title story regarding the consciousness of a community hitherto considered speechless. The social custom of *Bahu Juthai* makes it mandatory for Madho to surrender his newly married wife first to the landlord of the village. It is only after the sexual gratification of the landlord that she is allowed to enter the house of her legal husband. However, through multiple sequences of epiphanic events, the characters of the story raise a protest against this inhuman custom because they realize their humanity for the first time. As soon as the community decodes it mental slavery, they protest against it. The ending of the story is deeply emotional especially when the crowd is surprised to hear

the echoes of its own 'NO'. For generations, the idea of uttering 'No' was shut on them.

Our discussion on Ramnika shall remain unfinished without discussing the string of autobiographies that she wrote—each claiming to be more authentic than the previous one. The first in the series *Bhala Main Kaise Marti* (After All How I Could Have Died, 1997) is a collection of poems. As a social (auto)biography it answers a prominent question—what are the forces that work as a tonic for a social activist during her face-off with powerful enemies. *Haadse* (Encounters, 2005) is more of an autobiography in the normative sense. It accounts for the personal struggles of the protagonist in both domestic and social spheres. *Aaphudri: Ek Jiddi Ladki Ki Aatmkatha* (Autonomy: Autobiography of a Stubborn Girl, 2016) became a talking point for its frankness and boldness especially with respect to her intimate relations. However, according to me it is much more than that. *Aaphudri* is also an archive of Hazaribag and Dhanbad's social capital. It helps us to understand the questions of the subalterns as an issue within the state politics and their gradual translation on to the national polity.

By 2016, *Haadse* came out in English translation. She called me last year and asked me to translate *Aaphudri* into English. I said no as I was quite busy with other assignments. After a week, my office assistant approached me with a thick book—*Aaphudri*! She had posted the book along with the copyright permission! She knew how to get the work done from her foot soldiers! Ramnika would do anything to remain in front and she was not shy of it. She was a hard taskmaster and her employees had a tough time working under her. Nobody has stayed in her Foundation for more than six months except a certain Dinesh—she told me once, with pride.

Ramnika Gupta's contribution to Hindi literature and Indian society is invaluable. It is difficult to ascertain if any other contemporary writer could have worked that much for the uplift of the adivasi,-dalit-stree *sahitya* both as an organizer and a contributor. She was an organic intellectual in the truest sense of the term. Hindi literature and the subaltern communities could have been much poorer without her. We need more Ramnikas in our society.

