

Dr. Vidyut Bhagwat (1947- 2024)

Dr. Vidyut Bhagwat, a pioneering feminist scholar-activist, passed away on July 11, 2024, following a brief illness. She was the founding director of the Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre at Savitribai Phule Pune University. She was known for her contributions to the discipline of women's studies and various social and women's movements. She was among the first to initiate a teaching programme and research in women's studies with a vision to develop a community of women's studies researchers and scholars.

Dr. Bhagwat made significant contributions to women's studies in India and studied the social history of Maharashtra from a gendered perspective. She published extensively in the areas of feminist thought, women's issues, and the social history of Maharashtra. Her research explored the interconnectedness between literature and society, demonstrating how literature can serve as a source of research and how research should be conducted. Her work highlighted that interdisciplinary research in women's studies is incomplete without examining the intersection between gender and caste. She was one of the early scholars to introduce interdisciplinary perspectives and methods into social sciences.

Her writings on the social history of Maharashtra, particularly on colonial Maharashtra, significantly advanced the understanding of the construction of the "woman question" in the region. Her important works on women's education, sexuality, and figures such as Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, Savitribai Phule and Mahatma Phule provided fresh perspectives on understanding the construction of the woman question in Maharashtra. Her contribution to the volume 'Women's Writing in India (600 BC -to Present)' by Tharu and K. Laita made women's writing from Maharashtra accessible to a broader audience. Her critical engagement with how women have written about the body, sexuality, and society offered new insights into researching women's issues. Her book 'Feminist Social Thought' critically examined the contributions of pioneering feminist scholars and drew lessons for feminist theorization in the Indian context.

Another significant aspect of her scholarship was her extensive publication in Marathi, both in academic and popular platforms. Her writings on the construction of the woman question in colonial Maharashtra and various contemporary issues significantly shaped the discourse on women's issues in Maharashtra.

Her Marathi writings, such as 'Stree Prashnachi Watchal: Pariwartanachya Deeshene', provided a fresh perspective on understanding the woman question in Maharashtra. Through her research and writing, she created intellectual resources in women's studies and furthered the debate on women's issues. Alongside her research, she was passionate about starting teaching programmes in women's studies and contributed to building a disciplinary foundation for the field. Her vision and contributions laid a strong foundation for teaching and research at the Pune Women's Studies Centre, which gained recognition as an Advanced Centre by the University Grants Commission.

Her writings emphasized the interconnections between the woman question and caste question, research and action, and the politics of knowledge at both local and global levels. She also undertook a translation project that made key articles and literary texts available in Marathi, bridging the discourse between women's studies in English and Marathi.

Dr. Bhagwat maintained her ties with the women's movement and was involved in other social movements, such as farmers' organizations, Dalit and Adivasi movements, and OBC Muslim organizations. This helped in maintaining the political nature of women's studies and the discipline's critical edge.

She made significant contributions to building a solid foundation for the women's studies centre at Savitribai Phule Pune University. Her openness to new ideas and approaches provided a space for younger colleagues and researchers to debate and dialogue, fostered independent thinking and a strong sense of belonging.

In both personal and institutional spaces, she strived to lay the foundation for new ways of thinking and creating democratic spaces for knowledge-making. Her institutional interventions and practices consistently reminded us that feminist politics involves active critical engagement rather than merely being a lifestyle.

Another significant aspect of her work was her literary writing. Her poems and novels represented a critical engagement with various aspects of human relations, offering intense critiques and introspection. Her literary writings blurred the lines between literature and social science. Through her academic and institutional practices and her writing, she emphasized the importance of rigour and discipline in women's studies and ensured that the field remained accessible to all. Her insistence on discipline, transparency, and her frank and assertive personality made her unique and complex. This aspect of her personality helped her build dialogue with young researchers and maintain her relevance. We salute her contributions to the women's studies and women's movement, particularly in Maharashtra.

(Department of Women and Gender Studies, Savitribai Phule Pune University)