

Remembering Nirmala Sharma's Courageous Work for India's Distressed Women and the Poorest People

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*A tribute often paid to social activists is of their lifelong commitment. It is rare to find someone who got involved with social commitments in middle age and then very quickly established a reputation for complete honesty and limitless courage. This would be even more unexpected for a woman who had hitherto been confined mainly to family responsibilities in a middle-class Delhi household. However this is precisely what **Nirmala Sharma** achieved in Delhi, starting around 1991 at the age of 44 and continuing for about 25 years till her tragic death in the middle of several struggles.*

Nirmala Sharma formed an organization called Jagriti Mahila Samiti (JSM or Committee for the Social Awakening of Women) which soon acquired a well-deserved reputation of taking up the cause of several distressed women in highly determined ways. Nirmala did not step back from helping these women even when she was personally beaten up by the oppressors of these women who had escaped law by paying bribes. She faced these oppressors and corrupt officials with courage right inside their homes, police stations and courts, fighting long legal battles in very adverse conditions.

As the reputation of her efforts spread fast, she was invited by one of the most well-established women's organization to be a part of a function in memory of women victims, organized in collaboration with police. After homage and speeches were done, the meeting was announced to be over. Nirmala was on her feet, protesting that more should be discussed and done. She wanted to examine all the cases of women victims mentioned here to see in how many cases justice had been done and the culprits were punished. Within a few days she was involved in protests leading to her personal victimization when she took forward such issues on the streets.

She widened the horizons of women's issues to get seriously involved deeply in several efforts of getting relief for victims of slum demolitions and evictions of hawkers. Although these were very difficult struggles, several times she and her colleagues succeeded in getting significant relief for victims. She was also involved very deeply in anti-liquor movement and while most local people were afraid of the liquor mafias that were very active in many slums, she along with her colleagues personally raided the illegal storage places of these liquor mafias several times.

While taking up all these courageous activities, Nirmala continued to take good care of her family. A deeply religious person, several times when I went to meet her early in morning

she was busy in her puja (worship). She derived strength from religion to keep alive her struggles to help the poorest people and highly distressed women. Although she came from a Brahmin family, she was in the forefront of helping dalits and her closest colleague was a Muslim woman Durdana Khan who too shared the beatings and insults Nirmala Sharma received in the course of her struggles.

Nirmala, Durdana and other colleagues did not hesitate to go to those places where there was a chance that they may be assaulted or hurt. From where did Nirmala, who had hardly ever seen a struggle before the age of 44, get this strength suddenly to be in the middle of several such struggles simultaneously? Nirmala's elderly uncle was a freedom fighter. Her father Pandit Hotilal was a scholarly person who had so impressed the leading industrialist for whom he worked that the industrialist was keen to get his own children educated by him. Hotilal agreed, but at the same time continued to find the time to teach children from poor families, not accepting any honorarium from either the top industrialist or from the poor households. At the same time, he mobilized the workers to raise demands for better facilities for their colony, something the industrialist had to accept.

So probably the seeds of sensitivity to the problems of the distressed and the poor were already there in Nirmala, but the person who should get the most credit for launching Nirmala on the path of social movements was her husband Amarnath Sharma. An academic, he had annoyed his seniors by mobilizing the workers of the institute where he worked. A substantial part of his salary was spent on helping others in need. He was all the time encouraging Nirmala to do something for distressed people and particularly for women in a selfless way, but without joining any political party or electoral politics. He was the real mentor of Nirmala the social activist, but unfortunately he died from cancer in 1996. This was the biggest shock of her life for Nirmala, but her struggles continued. After some years Nirmala's eldest son too died from cancer. The fact that she could continue her work involving struggles on almost daily basis in the middle of such personal setbacks speaks enormously for her very deep social commitments.

As a journalist who reported on her struggles in newspapers and also brought out supportive booklets, I met Nirmala Ji several times and she always impressed me with how deeply she cared for the people for whom she working. Here I am providing some glimpses of her work.

Helping Distressed Women

Shanti's world seemed to have collapsed when her husband was killed and their property was snatched. From a happy housewife she was reduced to a domestic servant washing dishes in some homes. Then someone told her about an organisation called Jagriti Mahila Samiti (JMS) which had helped several women like her.

“When she came to our office she did not even have any chappals (footwear) on her feet. What is worse, her traumatic experiences had shattered all her confidence,” recalled Nirmala Sharma, President of JMS.

Realising the urgency of her situation, JMS gave priority time to her and after several rounds of government offices and courts, her property was restored to her. What is more, JMS established a close bond with her and its various members made small contributions to facilitate the marriage of Shanti's daughter.

Chandra Prabha had lost all hope of her ten-year old dispute with her estranged husband being settled and the dowry and other money being returned to her. But thanks to the effective action of JMS she could obtain a settlement of Rs. 3,55,000 within a short time of seeking this organisation's help. This enabled her to start a new life.

These are only a few examples of hundreds of women who received effective help from JMS. When women victims of injustice came to JMS, its first effort was to fight this injustice. But in other cases where misunderstandings could be removed and an amicable settlement could be reached, JMS tries to work in this direction. Hundreds of family disputes were settled as a result of the intervention of JMS.

Wider Struggles

What is more, JMS took a broad view of women's issues to include many issues related closely to the well-being of poor communities but which are quite often taken to be beyond the scope of a women's organisation. For example JMS had been carrying out educational and other constructive work in a hut colony of Subhash Nagar, in West Delhi. This colony's population included several widows as well as other households dependent mainly on the earnings of women. Several of these women worked in very difficult conditions as domestic servants to provide for their children. Once when most of the earning members of this colony had gone for work, without giving any notice this colony was demolished.

In such circumstances JMS took up opposition of this demolition as its main work for several days. Some persons objected to this as they felt that JMS should tackle only women-related issues. But for JMS it was clear that just now the biggest issue for these women as well as the entire community of these slums dwellers was the loss of their one and only shelter in the city. In such a situation to talk about education or any other issue would have appeared ridiculous to the affected women as well as their families squatting in the open without any shelters. So JMS boldly took the path of resisting and opposing this demolition.

During this movement some members of JMS including Nirmala Sharma were implicated in false cases and jailed. However, despite the repression unleashed on them the struggle continued and ultimately the huts were reconstructed on the same land in a better condition than before as a result of this struggle.

Similarly JMS fought a long and difficult struggle on behalf of vegetable vendors who were evicted from a place that had been allotted to them in Paschim Vihar. To protest against this JMS members and evicted vendors sat on a dharna-cum-fast in the bitterly cold weather of Delhi in December 1997 and January 1998. The police did not allow them to erect a temporary shelter. Finally the administration ordered an inquiry and found that the site had been legally allotted to the vegetable vendors but powerful persons were trying to grab this land. The vegetable vendors got back the land to sell their vegetables.

When Nirmala Sharma had gone to officials to obtain the records relating to this land, she was told by one official that she'll not get the land records. He further threatened her to stop making such demands or else he will have her badly beaten by the police and implicated in cases. The fact that a social activist asking just for some information on land records could be threatened in such a bad way really hurt Nirmala who was then attracted to the right to information movement. She then played an important role in this movement in Delhi. She took this movement to the slum dwellers and several meetings were organised on this issue in slums and bastis of Delhi.

The growing fame of JMS as an honest and dedicated organisation led to people from outside Delhi also approaching this organisation for intervention in cases relating to atrocities against women. Nirmala Sharma went to investigate and/or settle several serious cases such as those in Kalota (Rajasthan), Hullaheri (Haryana) and Ferozepur (Punjab). As a recognition of the broad-based work of this women's organisation Nirmala Sharma was appointed the Delhi Convener of the National Alliance for People's Movements (NAPM).

Apart from JMS's concentrated work in some slum clusters, it also took up issue based work which yielded good results for almost all the residents of Delhi. JMS took up a crusade against the corruption in Delhi Milk Scheme. This corruption was responsible for the denial of milk or the supply of adulterated milk to several people in Delhi. What started as a small struggle to improve milk distribution in Khyala village led to a wider movement with the cooperation of Delhi Milk Supply workers. Ultimately one of the most corrupt officers was removed and jailed. Many cases of corruption were exposed drawing attention to various types of malpractices. Khyala, where the struggle started, got new milk booths.

Similarly the anti-liquor efforts of JMS led to the exposure of several liquor mafias, particularly the large-scale distribution of liquor by them at election time. Sale and consumption of liquor in several slums declined considerably as a result of the efforts of JMS.

However, JMS activists regretted that their efforts could not go ahead further because of victimisation of several activists and implicating them in a number of false cases. Several of them were also been beaten up badly by the police as well as gangsters. Despite this, JMS continued its good work of combining several constructive activities with struggles for the rights of the poor for nearly 25 years. Few organisations have achieved so much within a span of a few years, that too in the middle of so much victimisation and hindrance. What is more, all this was achieved without any institutional funding or outside funding. JMS depended only on small donations made by its members and supporters for all its work. It received very useful support from a few dedicated lawyers who worked without any fees for JMS.

Protecting Dignity

P, a girl from a lower middle class family was forced by economic circumstances to marry a mentally challenged youth from a millionaire family. She decided to adjust herself somehow in the difficult conditions, but a worse fate awaited her. Taking advantage of her vulnerable situation, her father-in-law subjected her to sexual exploitation. In very adverse condition she had to tolerate this for some years, but when her eldest daughter reached an age where she could understand what was happening, she motivated her mother to revolt against this. The result was that both mother and daughter were treated in a most cruel way.

It was at this stage that P. was given the address of JMS. JMS helped P. to face her exploiters (as well as officials in collusion with them) boldly and for the first time in the late years of this relationship of shame and exploitation, the millionaire got scared at the very real possibility of the public exposure of his misdeeds. For the first time he was willing to reach a compromise and compensate his victim. P. was most concerned about bringing up her daughters away from the shadow of this exploitation. So JMS helped her to reach a settlement in such a way that she could now live peacefully with her daughter in another city.

From complete loss of hope to a new life of hope - this is the story of many women who

have come to JMS for help. U.R. is another such example. Her five year old daughter was raped by a relative who had also been responsible for driving her out of her home. With the help of JMS, a completely broken U.R. could arrange for some relief for her daughter and she could also get back her house.

As news of the dedicated work done by JMS spread beyond Delhi, it started getting appeals from other parts of the country for help. S, a girl from Hissar, was married in Ferozepur, where her husband and other members of his family badly mistreated her and thrashed her on several occasions. One day her husband pushed her from a second floor. S. sustained serious injuries. When this was brought to the notice of JMS, Nirmala Sharma herself went to Ferozepur and brought S. from there. For the first time S. felt that she had strong support and could send her tormentors to prison. However for the sake of her family she was still willing to give them a chance. So long talks followed as her husband admitted his mistakes and agreed to live with her separately in Delhi for some time. JMS continued to monitor for a long time to ensure that the husband didn't go back to his old ways.

A. was frequently mistreated and occasionally physically beaten by her husband, a rich property dealer. Then without informing her he married another girl. A's world appeared to crumble around her, but JMS helped her to get proper compensation.

However her parents acted in unseemly hurry to arrange her second marriage without properly checking the background of the groom. He started beating her soon after marriage and refused to take care of her daughter from her first marriage. JMS helped her again to get a settlement. In addition it helped her to get a part time job and start an independent life with her daughter.

Standing Up for the Poor

In 1999 the authorities again sent a demolition squad to Subhash Nagar hut colony. As the protesters were being beaten by the police, Nirmala Sharma offered herself for arrest to prevent injuries to many people. The case reached right up to the Union Urban Minister who decided that the demolition of this slum was unjustified. However as the huts and development complexes had been demolished, people had to construct new huts in nearby area. Thus their homes were protected for a second time within three years.

JMS succeeded in preventing evictions in several places like Rajiv Gadhi Camp (Punjabi Bagh), Madipur, Pitampura etc. In Raghbir Nagar old F Block JMS fought one of its most bitter battles to save the huts of nearly 4000 families. The livelihood of most of these families was closely tied to the old clothes market located nearby. The women of the families were the leading bread-winners as they exchanged steel utensils with old clothes, moving from house to house, street to street. This livelihood also led to proper use of old clothes (which would otherwise be thrown away) and made available cheaply priced ready-made clothes to the poorest sections. JMS emphasised all these aspects as it fought a valiant battle to save the livelihood and homes of these families. In this struggle Nirmala Sharma and her closest colleague Dudhana Khan were beaten up badly. Although they could not save the huts from demolition, they continued the struggle for getting all the necessary facilities at the resettlement site in Bakkarwala. Using right to information legislation JMS asked for all papers relating to the fund allocation for Bakkarwal resettlement work. Senior officials replied - we'll cooperate and provide facilities, but please do not ask for old accounts and papers. But JMS said that we've to ensure that public funds are spent properly, so you've to show us the accounts.

JMS also struggled hard to successfully prevent the eviction of several hawkers and vendors, or if eviction had taken place before JMS was informed, then JMS successfully campaigned for marketing rights to be restored to vendors and hawkers.

One of the longest struggles took place in A-5 vegetable market in Paschim Vihar. Very powerful persons were trying to grab this land where a large number of vegetable vendors had been trying to earn their livelihood. Braving rain and bitterly cold weather, the dharna (sit-in) for protecting the rights of vegetable vendors continued for a long time. Finally the vendors got back their land after a long struggle. Similarly JMS was able to protect the right of vegetable vendors at Nangloi, hawkers at Uttam nagar and flowerpot sellers at various places to a considerable extent.

While crises situations were becoming quite frequent for JMS, in more normal times JMS was able to do exceedingly useful work as a 'family counselling centre', helping to protect hundreds of women and satisfactorily resolving disputes in hundreds of families. The high moral strength which JMS commanded helped it greatly in resolving disputes. JMS was careful to listen closely to both sides in a dispute. In most cases both sides felt that they got a satisfactory hearing. Nirmala Sharma told me that in 80% of the cases for which the help of JMS was sought, it was able to settle the dispute amicably to the satisfaction of both parties. In the remaining cases papers were prepared carefully for the police cell of crimes against women in such a way that it became easier to obtain justice. JMS also followed up several of its more difficult cases to ensure that promises made to women were actually honoured. JMS also prioritized to give more attention and time to poor women as they need its services the most.

JMS provided a socially harmonious environment in which persons of several communities, castes and religions could work together for common aims. Herself a deeply religious and spiritual person, Nirmala Sharma enjoyed the complete trust of her close colleagues from Muslim community. Despite being extremely busy in problems relating to the urban poor and particularly women, JMS found the time to play host to activists of other movements when they came to Delhi. Nirmala Sharma was one of the convenors of the Delhi Branch of the National Alliance for People's Movement for a long time.

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