

# Obituary

## Sharmila Rege, 1964–2013



Courtesy: Surekha Bharati

Sharmila Rege (1964–2013)

How does one commemorate the life of someone like Sharmila Rege? She passed away so suddenly at the age of just 48 that communities of scholars, activists, students and friends are struggling to come to terms with the void that she has left behind. Nevertheless, we would be quite mistaken to think of her in conventional terms as a person in mid career. It has been astonishing and humbling to discover just how many full lives she had already traversed in the all too brief time that she spent among us and how fruitful her commitment to institutional change had already become. Sharmila was a sociologist, feminist and anti-caste scholar-activist whose thought and action brought the politics of popular culture, the discipline of sociology and the breadth of women's studies to bear on each other in ever more inclusive and creative forms. Her major goal was to acquire the necessary resources to be able to weld together perspectives on caste and gender from what she called a 'Dalit feminist standpoint'.

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*Contributions to Indian Sociology* 47, 3 (2013): 445–448  
SAGE Publications Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC  
DOI: 10.1177/0069966713506396

Her earliest concerns were to integrate sociology and gender, not simply at the level of research, but—and this is what makes her so unique—by engaging with the specific history of sociology in Maharashtra. This meant taking on the increasingly low status of the subject in colleges and universities; making efforts to bring courses on women and gender into the curriculum; and doing all of the above while keeping in mind her students at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, many of whom were non-English speaking and from non-upper caste backgrounds. As she expressed her task in the remarkable essay ‘Institutional Alliance between Sociology and Gender Studies: The Story of the Monkey and the Crocodile’ (*EPW*, 9 August 1997), this meant confronting the already acknowledged problem of ‘common sense’ among sociology students, with feminist claims to valourise experience as a viable source of knowledge. According to her, at least three positions were involved:

[T]he position of a feminist confronting patriarchies in sociology, both at the academic and institutional levels; two, the position of a third world feminist and sociologist confronting the agendas of western feminism and sociology; three, the position of a gender sensitive sociologist located in India, interrogating the complexities of caste, class, ethnicity and gender (ibid.: 2025).

However, integration was not always institutionally available, so much so that she moved from her initial location in the department of sociology at the University of Pune to the ‘autonomous’ Krantijyoti Savitri Phule Centre for Women’s Studies at the same university. There, over the years, she ably brought together a team of teachers and students to make it one of the most vibrant hubs of activity in the country. But this did not mean that she turned her back on the discipline that formed her. One sign of this was the edited volume *Sociology of Gender: The Challenge of Feminist Sociological Knowledge* (2003), which drew on articles from the *Sociological Bulletin* and which SAGE publications advertised as one of its bestsellers.

It was the deeply challenging and, indeed, risky entanglements of caste and gender that were to become her central preoccupation right up to what have become her last publications: *Against the Madness of Manu: B.R. Ambedkar on Brahmanical Patriarchy* (edited, 2013) and the special issue of the *Review of Women’s Studies* of the *Economic and*

*Political Weekly* (4 May 2013) on Caste and Gender. She was able to demonstrate how questions of caste and gender involve the conceptual and political complexities of intersecting structures and relationships that have been (quite misleadingly) reduced to an ‘identity politics’ in much contemporary debate. In the context of the women’s movement, her demand for dialogue across divisions, and her images of ‘building bridges’ and being a ‘welder’ have been powerful responses to situations of separation and disagreement. But hers was a reasoned and practical response that believed that rethinking gender and caste would create meaningful connections between women, not the false dream of unity. Not surprisingly, such a stance evoked considerable debate, both from feminists unused to thinking about their caste as well as from Dalit women quite suspicious about the possibility of a non-Dalit person genuinely adopting a Dalit standpoint.

Sometimes, in the heat of the debates that she incited, the protagonists were in danger of forgetting that it was she who had, through her work, taken on the risk of creating the context and the means for such debate in the first place. The volume on Dalit women’s writings, *Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Dalit Women’s Testimonios* (2007), sought to interrogate dominant feminist understandings of women’s life narratives by highlighting a writing style that could not be rendered as autobiography (i.e., the story of the self) but rather as the testimony of and to a community. It is in the volume on the select writings of B.R. Ambedkar that Sharmila was able to weld together most of her concerns. In doing so, she also issued a series of challenges—to academia (and to sociology in particular)—for having been so slow in taking the work of Ambedkar seriously; to all those interested in popular culture by showing that it was precisely in posters, music and pamphlets that Ambedkar’s life and work resonated most powerfully; to Ambedkar scholars for not appreciating that the subordination of women was, in his view, an essential facet of the creation of a caste system; and finally, to feminists with the demand that they must reclaim Ambedkar.

Sharmila’s writings have made her deservedly a well-known and widely read scholar, whose writings form a publicly available archive to learn from and to engage with. Less visible is all the institutional work that she did as a teacher, organiser and leader, especially in the realm of pedagogy and language, where rewards are not so easy to come by. Where many stop with good intentions, Sharmila actually followed through with the necessary ground work. This involved a punishing work schedule including

such tasks as visiting numerous colleges and universities across the state of Maharashtra, conducting workshops and in-depth investigations, producing bilingual textbooks for students, designing unique bridge courses and paying special attention to first-generation learners. Even more amazing was the way in which she could turn an institutional crisis or a problem on its head, and so transform it into an opportunity. This capacity was made visible when she and her colleagues were forced, by circumstances not in their control, to set up the women's studies centre outside the department of sociology, thus losing a dialogical if critical link with a discipline. Yet, sticking to this new context produced its own dividends over the years. Not only did more and more disciplines become connected with their work, but they were able to move beyond the portals of the university itself to undergraduate colleges and universities elsewhere. Similarly, when the crisis of higher education in the time of neoliberal reforms hit the university with demands for vocationalisation, employability, and so on, here was a women's studies centre that took the bull by the horns. Rather than retreat into a 'pure' academic space or simply decry the declining standards being imposed both from without and within, Sharmila and her team embarked on a project of re-imagining the meaning of higher education itself. She organised workshops that frontally addressed the question of the relationship between studying gender and the 'jobs' it could lead to. She made students key participants and not just passive recipients of courses linking quality and disadvantage, which changed the very content and dynamic of the classroom. In these and numerous ways, the Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre has ventured onto new terrain and produced work that deserves to be widely disseminated if not emulated.

Because Sharmila devoted all her energies to working with others, there are now friends, colleagues and students who will take forward her immensely ambitious agenda under conditions that she herself helped create. Her sudden and untimely passing is not what anyone could have expected or wished for, or at least not in this way. But then those whose lives she touched must take on the work of mourning—to allow the spirit of Sharmila to live on in ways that she would have wanted, to be changed by that, and so to be true to her memory.

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