

---

---

---

---

---

---

# Invitation to Practise Social Fellowship

GEETHA V

To read this book is to mine a world of layered scholarship and the rewards are diverse and rich. For those who have followed Sharmila Rege's work over the years, the coming together of her many concerns – a critical sociology of caste, knowledge systems produced by anti-caste movements and thinkers, the caste-gender conundrum, pedagogical practices that foreground and take seriously the life-worlds of the dis-privileged – in this single volume should prove a veritable treat. For feminists, grappling with the manner in which the axes of gender and caste intersect to constitute a system of graded inequality as well as what Rege felicitously refers to as “graded violence towards women”, her reading of Babasaheb Ambedkar's writings on women can only be exciting and very suggestive. Anti-caste activists and thinkers who know all too well the venality and cruelty of the caste order, may find themselves surprised by how the most pernicious aspects of the caste system are also its most patriarchal.

For those of us who are familiar with the scholarship and practice of anti-brahman and anti-caste movements and ideas across this subcontinent, Ambedkar's extremely acute observations are bound to appear at once familiar and novel. This is so because some of the questions he raised with regard to the relative status of shudras and women were also matters of concern to say, men like E V Ramasamy Periyar and the young feminists in his movement. It was novel because he identifies for us the logic that underlies “the madness of Manu”, and which render Manu's obsession with establishing and tweaking social differences and hierarchies, his prejudicial disregard for the shudras and chandalas and his obvious misogyny, crucial and hegemonic aspects of the Hindu social order.

## BOOK REVIEW

**Against the Madness of Manu: B R Ambedkar's Writings on Brahminical Patriarchy**, selected and introduced by Sharmila Rege (*New Delhi: Navayana*, 2013; pp 266, Rs 350).

The book has four sections. An extensive introduction interrogates the reluctance and failure on the part of Indian feminists to seriously engage with Ambedkar's writings on women. Dismissive, indignant and mostly ignorant, as it is, this studied non-engagement, argues Rege, has to do with the Indian intellectual and academic disregard for Ambedkar's ideas on the one hand, and on the other, it has to do with feminist inability to productively contend with the novel and radical manner in which he brings together the personal and the political, the home and community. This inability, she goes on to say, contrasts with the lively debates that have ensued in what she calls the “dalit counter publics” comprising dalit scholarship on Ambedkar's writings and ideas in Marathi, popular cultural expressions, including music, theatre and visual art.

### Companionate Marriage

Citing a popular visual rendering of Ambedkar and his first wife, Ramabai on the day of their marriage – this image features as the cover of this book – Rege leads us into a fascinating detour through dalit popular perceptions of Ambedkar's conjugal life. Picking up an argument from her earlier book, *Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Dalit Women's Testimonios*, she suggests that the ideal of companionate marriage, which marks the upper-caste woman's entry into the modern world, has to be viewed alongside another ideal and one which repositions conjugality within the context of

an evolving political community. This latter, Rege demonstrates, is one that Ambedkar helped shape, and by that token, it rested on the resilience, trust and deeply affectionate commitment that Ramabai had for her husband's work. To be sure she argued with him, did not always accept his views, but ultimately she realised, notes Rege the utopian power of his vision and endorsed it. Ramabai's example, we realise, especially if we are familiar with her earlier work (cited above) was one shared by several women in the Ambedkarite movement, who took to heart Babasaheb's injunction to rework the terms of both community and conjugality. This aspect of our historical experience still awaits a feminist reclaiming and unless we do so, we may not be able to grasp how Ambedkar did caste and gender simultaneously.

The value of this introduction is also on account of how Rege unpacks this vexed relationship between caste and gender: she points out that the impossibility of attending to the one without attending to the other is not always easily grasped. Often, those who bring caste into considerations of gender are “allowed” to do their thing, while others go on to do “gender”; likewise those who engage with caste, but not gender, appear oblivious to the manner in which they end up endorsing normative aspects of the caste order – she points to the presumptions that underlie certain non-brahman considerations of femaleness in the Marathi context, and notes that these men invariably “sexualised” western modernity, while rendering “non-brahman patriarchies invisible”. In the event, Rege makes it clear that to undertake a critical and reflexive feminist analysis in the Indian context, one cannot and must not easily disentangle caste from gender.

Given the manner in which, in some instances, subaltern rejections of caste have led to a persuasive yet ultimately hyper-masculine public culture, which on that account lacks the critical edge to fight caste (as is evident in the non-brahman Tamil context), Sharmila's injunctions to keep together our

analyses of caste and gender appear all too important.

### Neglect of Ambedkar

This introduction is followed by three sections of texts featuring Ambedkar's writings. Section one comprises selections that examine and explain the structural basis as well as the historical contexts that produced female subordination and degradation in the Hindu social order. The next section features three riddles from his much-derided *Riddles in Hinduism* – his outlining of these riddles help us ponder the relationship between marriage practices and the elaboration of social differences and inequalities. The third section is devoted to the Hindu Code Bill, and the manner of its demise – the argument here derives from Ambedkar's ethical determination to secure legal guarantees, however limited these might be, for his vision of sexual equality and justice.

Each section is preceded by an extensive introductory essay – by Rege – that places Ambedkar's arguments in the context of the immediate historical context, his life-long concern with a knowledge that might yet secure for the dalits and other lower castes their secular redemption, and most important, over and against debates within Indian feminism. Annotations, explanations, citations and a usable index complete the book.

Taken together, the three sectional introductions outline a set of very valuable ideas: the first points to our habitual neglect of Ambedkar's views on the caste order, particularly his insistence that we see caste as entailing a relationship that rests on endogamous marriage practices. Social reproduction, we realise, is crucial to exercises of power, authority and control in caste society. Rege calls attention to salient aspects of Ambedkar's argument in this regard – his views on how castes retain or do not retain sexual parity to prevent exogamous unions, and how they manage "sexual surplus". She also frames his understanding of the "fall of Hindu women" in this context, and shows how he understood shifts in sexual and conjugal practices, particularly those that occurred with

the brahmanical victory over Buddhism, as leading to both shudra slavery as well as the degradation of women.

### Useful for Feminists

Ambedkar's reading of Manu's dicta – essays that feature in the second section – with respect to who shall marry whom and become whom, which is what constitutes the "madness of Manu", extends his earlier views on this subject. For feminists this section should prove useful: for one, it provides a conceptual template to analyse contemporary sexual and demographic anxieties, the ever-declining sex ratio, for instance: if sati, enforced widowhood and child marriage enabled brahmin men – historically – to shore their sexual and social hegemony, while taking care of "surplus" brahmin women, female infanticide and son-preference ensure that women are forever in deficit, and this almost ontological disregard for their existence then "explains" and "legitimises" every sort of subordination. Secondly, these essays on how the *smritikaras* sought to "fix" caste identity in the face of proliferating and hybrid social identities, should lead us to examine, as Rege's explanations suggest we should, similar policing of hybridities in our own time, through khap and caste panchyats and crimes of (dis)honour.

Rege's own illustration in this context is apposite to our concerns: discussing the manner in which differential marriage (and sexual) laws and differential laws of descent for different castes were sought to be put in place by Manu, Rege brings up the contentious debates around the figure of the devadasi, both in the heyday of Hindu social reform and in our own time, when feminists have differed in their understanding of caste-mandated sexual labour. She argues that while feminists may want to see in the figure of the temple dancer and her modern-day counterpart, the bar dancer an agential persona, that works only if we choose to ignore the structuring power and mandate of caste. For in all contexts, the sexual labourer is more often than not from the poorest and most abject communities. She argues that this was why for Ambedkar the figure of the *murali* was one marked by the stigma of caste

and brahminical depravity. If he sought to "reclaim" the *murali*, this was not because he thought she should be reformed into marriage – he says, for instance, that one may earn a living in myriad other ways – but because only on the ground one gains through a rejection of a caste-ordained practice, may one seek to build a new sense of the self.

Rege's framing of the Hindu Code Bill debates begin an argument that could well be extended into another book. For inevitably, we want more from this section, since the scholarship on this score, as Rege notes, is far from adequate and feminist legal scholarship sadly wanting in this respect. Ambedkar was brought into this debate late, but he made up for lost time by immediately reframing its concerns within a new ethic he clearly hoped would animate social relationships and transactions. His obvious interest in reforming Hindu law to reflect his – and others' – radical vision of equality, justice and citizenship did not win him friends. On the other hand, he had allies, who endorsed his reform measures, and these included almost all the women in the Constituent Assembly, and liberal members of the House. The story of the Hindu Code Bill still remains to be told

Get your **manuscript**  
published fast and  
professionally.

— The —  
**Book  
Mint**

THE ART AND EFFICIENCY  
OF BOOK PUBLISHING

*The Book Mint is a subsidiary  
of Academic Foundation*



4772/23 Bharat Ram Road,  
Daryaganj, New Delhi - 110 002.  
Tel: +91-11-23245001, 02, 03, 04.  
Fax: +91-23245005.  
email: bookmintindia@gmail.com  
website: www.bookmint.in

in all its drama and detail, and Rege has given us a very valuable cue to respond to – and one hopes that many do.

### **Earnest Examination**

*Against the Madness of Manu* is as much about the doing of scholarship as it is about being critically attentive to texts that we have habitually ignored or put aside. For nearly two decades, Rege has pointed to the importance of constructing a knowledge world produced by various counter publics, both non-brahmin and dalit, and within these, feminist visions and articulations. She has also alerted us to how we may be reflexive about knowledge making as such: in what contexts, from what locations, and through what discursive means we theorise and

argue, and what we seek to foreground, and what we end up subsuming are not to be taken for granted, but earnestly examined. She has also shown us that to be reflexive does not mean that we adopt a “reconciliatory” tone, for that could be condescending at best, but that we attend to voices from the margins, without seeking to recoup them within familiar and established feminist protocols of understanding. Nor are we to be combative, and argue, as some have, that there is dalit patriarchy as there is brahminical patriarchy – more important is to ask ourselves how within this system of graded inequality and violence, patriarchal structures work their effects.

And it is not mere conceptual clarity that a book like this offers: it bears the

deep impress of practice, of several years of classroom transactions, of effort expended in creating and sustaining new circuits of knowledge that bring together bilingual, even trilingual worlds, and the continuous forging of lively and dynamic relationships, with dalit students, thinkers, non-brahmin publicists, feminist scholars and activists.

*Against the Madness of Manu* is an invitation to practise *maithri*, social fellowship of the most fundamental kind, and in that sense, it echoes that deeply moving and brilliant text, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.

---

Geetha V ([geethv@gmail.com](mailto:geethv@gmail.com)) is a writer and publisher, and her interests include feminism, caste and education.