

Sharmila Rege (1964-2013)

Pursuing Knowledge for Social Transformation

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In her classroom teaching Sharmila Rege constantly focused on how the interaction of students with the lived experiences of activists in social/protest movements and also with the masses could deepen their understanding of social reality as well as the close linkages between theory and ideology on the one hand and between theory, ideology and praxis on the other. She believed that gender studies and dalit studies were organically linked.

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As a teacher I had never imagined that I would be called upon to write an obituary of my much younger student who later became a colleague.

While writing about my over three-decade long association with Sharmila Rege it is difficult to be rational and detached. But howsoever difficult, an attempt has to be made to document the personal as well as professional gains and losses of not only the disciplines of sociology and feminist sociology but the entire social science community. It is with a heavy heart that I turn to my task.

Soon after I joined the faculty of Pune University's department of sociology, the University Grants Commission (UGC) selected it under the University Leadership Programme (ULP). All of us sociology teachers were then required to visit colleges where sociology was taught as an optional subject (at the general as well as major level) and deliver some model lectures on topics selected from

the undergraduate sociology syllabus. I remember holding four or five such sessions for BA students in Fergusson College Pune where Sharmila was doing her undergraduate studies. I observed her taking copious notes and showing a great deal of interest and learnt that she was planning to pursue a career in sociology. I did not know at that time that she was equally involved in protest movements, including the student movement. She completed her MA and MPhil with flying colours and immediately started teaching at St Mira's College in Pune. Shortly before that the UGC panel on Women's Studies had recommended our department's proposal for a Women's Studies Centre (WSC) in Pune University and the UGC approved it around mid-1987.

As part of our department's MA syllabus a course on "Sociology of Women" was being taught as an optional offering. However, it was being taught within a characteristically naïve sociological framework. After Vidyut Bhagwat, a well-known activist in the women's movement in Pune joined the WSC as the first faculty member she brought major feminist theorists into the teaching of the course/s on women's studies. This marked the first paradigm shift in the pedagogical practices of sociology and the WSC in Pune University. Soon thereafter when the WSC was given another faculty post Sharmila joined us in early

1991. But she was a teacher-colleague with a difference. For her, life was a mission for the pursuit of knowledge to be used for social transformation. Later she reinterpreted the desired transformation, not only within the procrustean Marxist framework of “revolution through class struggle”, since she found it inadequate for dealing with caste and gender issues. Her writings later gave a new epistemic and theoretical foundation to the feminist and the dalit-satyashodhak movements while passionately continuing with her experiments through her pedagogical practices at the wsc in Pune University. Thus, Sharmila brought the second paradigm shift in the teaching and research activities of wsc.

Creating a New Space

Her moving from St Mira’s to the wsc in Pune University, from there to the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Mumbai for a period and back again to the wsc in Pune University does not project only her career trajectory. It shows her ceaseless search for knowledge with a purpose and deep commitment to gender studies and dalit studies that she thought were organically linked in the Indian context. Especially while teaching such courses as “Caste, Class and Gender”, “Counter-Culture” and “Feminism and Feminist Theory” she convincingly demonstrated how the classroom could be turned into an activist’s arena, and how by experimenting with pedagogy one can train and ignite young minds, and prepare them for the purpose of societal transformation.

In her classroom teaching she constantly focused on how the interaction of students with the lived experiences of activists in social/protest movements and also with the masses could deepen their understanding of social reality as well as the close linkages between theory and ideology on the one hand and between theory, ideology and praxis on the other. At the same time she drew our attention to a peculiar “crisis” in the social science community in India: the crisis inherent in institutional and pedagogical shortcomings of our disciplinary training as it did not enable us to make sustainable knowledge claims. She emphasised the need to make knowledge claims accountable and

knowledge products analytically useful as also practically feasible to alter conditions of social existence.

When her article on *lavani* and *tamasha* (folk dance and theatre traditionally popular in Maharashtra) appeared in the *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (Vol 29, Nos 1-2, 1995) it had begun to become clear that she was exploring new areas of research and at the same time creating a space for studies of popular culture within the sociology of culture as also in gender studies. This paper showed how folk forms of cultural expressions tended to sexually exploit women performers. Similarly, forms of popular culture could also emerge as means to conscientise and mobilise the marginalised. She called it “counter politics”. Rege’s concerns were thus historically situated precisely at the time when boundaries between disciplines began to lose both meaning and purpose.

She was looking for opportunities to draw academia closer to the feminist and bahujansamaj dalit perspectives that have been posing challenges to mainstream social sciences. Her deep commitment to this cause was at times misconstrued as her “self-imposed alienation” from the mainstream of the sociology profession to which she truly belonged. But her sincere engagement with the task of opening a dialogue between gender studies and sociology could be understood only by a few.

In a short life span of 48 years, she spent nearly half with the sociology department of Pune University – two years as a student and 22 years as a faculty member. During her association with the wsc she produced an enormous amount of research work that includes *Sociology of Gender: The Challenge of Feminist Sociological Knowledge* (ed. Sage 2003); *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Testimonies of Dalit Women in Maharashtra* (ed. Zubaan Publications 2006), and *Against Madness of Manu: B R Ambedkar on Brahmanical Patriarchy* (edited, New Delhi Navayana Publications). True, all the three volumes are edited works. However, her scholarly and extensive introductions prove beyond any shadow of doubt that to be creative and original one does not have to be a

prolific writer. Between 1994 and 2010, Sharmila published as many as nine articles in the *Economic & Political Weekly*, two in *Sociological Bulletin* and two in *Seminar*. Her article in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* is highly cited in studies in popular culture and in my opinion made a niche for her in the field of social sciences in India. Besides these research articles in acclaimed research journals, she wrote nine articles in volumes edited by scholars like Maitreyi Chaudhuri, Sujata Patel, Kumkum Ray, Mary E John, and Anupama Rao and published by Oxford (OUP), Sage, Orient Longman, Penguin, Kali for Women, and others. With the help of Bhagwat and under joint authorship she also wrote several monographs and booklets in Marathi and English which were published and circulated by the wsc for the benefit of students, some of whom came to the wsc as first generation learners.

Interdisciplinary Efforts

After Bhagwat’s retirement from the wsc many well-wishers presumed that the centre’s activities would slacken. Instead, the pace of Sharmila’s multifaceted engagements with research further accelerated. She successfully negotiated her major project: *Reimagining Higher Education on the Site of Women’s Studies in India* (2008-12) with the Navajbai Ratan Tata Trust that awarded a hefty grant of Rs 8,715,000 to the wsc for a period of three years. In collaboration with a Bangalore-based centre, Sharmila implemented a number of her innovative ideas about developing bridge courses, modular training programmes for integrating training with criticality and employability of social science education in India which has been under the scanner for quite some time. Her effort was driven by a strong desire to create awareness among social sciences of the interdisciplinary field of gender studies, dalit studies, studies of sexuality and body and cultural studies and that any isolation from them would be to their disadvantage in the long run. Two years ago she received a research grant from Zubaan Publications for her project on *Oral Histories of Women’s Movement*. She had also just received another grant from the Indian Council of Social Sciences

and Research (ICSSR) to identify measures for Integrating Equality and Quality in Higher Education (for the period 2013-15). However, her sudden demise has left this work for her colleagues Anagha Tambe and Swati Dehadray in the wsc to carry forward and bring it to fruition.

For a variety of reasons Sharmila was not inclined to work on academic committees that multiply by the day. Yet in the interest of institution-building, especially for the long-term agenda of the wsc she agreed to work in the ICSSR as a member (2005-08) and also on its Research Committee, as a member of the UGC-appointed Committee on Parity in Scholarships and Fellowships; and also on the UGC's Expert Committee on Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy, and as a member of the editorial board of the *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*. Besides this, she was also associated with the UGC Committee on Women's Studies, the committees of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), the Central University at Gandhinagar, and the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla.

For her incomparable scholarly work and contributions Rege was awarded and decorated with the prestigious G Ram Reddy Award – 2012 for Social Sciences, the Malcolm Adiseshiah Award – 2006 (from MIDS, Chennai) for contributions to development studies, and also life membership of the Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore. She was invited to deliver the Ambedkar Memorial Lecture at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai (2009-10), and another at the Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi (April 2010). Usha Mehta, Neera Desai, Leela Dube, Vina Majumdar and Maithreyi Krishna Raj are mentioned as pioneers in the field of gender and women's studies in India especially after the publication of the *Status of Women in India Report*. Now along with Uma Chakravarti, Bina Agrawal, Padmini Swaminathan, Jashodhara A Bagchi, and others, the name of Sharmila Rege will surely be taken as belonging to the category of “non-conformist pace-setters” (to use Ramkrishna Mukherjee's metaphor).

In a recent perceptive article Pratima Pardeshi while paying tribute to Sharmila

(*Loksatta*, 21 July 2103, Pune edition, *Lokrang*) described her as a *satyashodhak buddhijeevi* (intellectual in the satyashodhak movement) that redefined “real indigenous culture” in India and promoted practices of popular culture. Pardeshi, a well-known dalit-feminist activist is absolutely right in saying that

Sharmila was an exemplar of how to continue selfless pursuit of truth and knowledge, and apply the products of knowledge to the everyday life of the common people. Sharmila's real contribution lies in her drawing the critical feminist discourse (that normally remains confined in the portals of university departments and their faculty – seminars and workshops) into the dalit movement and the feminist movement. Sharmila untiringly endeavoured to avoid the ghettoisation of the dalit and gender questions and to get the satyashodhak agenda into the mainstream of social science discourse. To achieve this she tried to build bridges with the Dr Ambedkar Academy, the Vidrohi Cultural Movement, the Satyashodhak Vidyarthi Sanghatana and became organically linked to them all, not just as a sympathiser but as a real activist – one with them.

The real question is whether different ideological streams and factions within these organisations among the dalit and feminist movements (especially in Maharashtra), considered and treated Sharmila as a genuine “insider” or as an “outsider within”?

Exposing Gender Blindness

As her teacher and supervisor of her doctoral thesis, I always felt diffident while working with her. She was specialising in gender studies and was doing serious readings in the feminist theory about which I did not have even rudimentary familiarity. Using the gender perspective she critically evaluated theoretical formulations of classical thinkers from Comte, Marx and Engels, and Spencer down to Durkheim, Max Weber and also some of the more contemporary sociological thinkers, and exposed their “gender blindness”. The sarcasm implied in the title of her PhD thesis “*From Mainstream to Male-stream Sociology*” beautifully summed up her position. She joined the wsc in 1991, and registered as a research student. But soon thereafter I had to go to the ICSSR as member secretary. She insisted that I supervise her work. Reading her draft chapters was a great

learning experience for me. For Sharmila it almost turned out to be a self-learning process that she handled with great ability and maturity. The pressure of my administrative work in ICSSR often resulted in delays in going through and commenting on her chapters and returning them to her. But she never became impatient. In fact it was through reading her chapters that I was introduced to the main debates and controversies within the feminist theoretical discourse. Only the delays on my part often left me with a sense of excessive guilt; now that will always keep pricking me for the rest of my life.

My only complaint about her is that she did not revise her thesis and get it published as a book. But from 1995 onwards when she obtained her PhD she became known as a scholar for her few but critical writings. Publication for her was not an end in itself; it was an effective tool for pedagogical practices. She refused to consider my suggestion of not stepping down from the chair professorship to which she was elevated directly from her post as lecturer in the sociology department in Pune University. That would have served two purposes simultaneously: it could have averted the eventual and unfortunate separation of the wsc from the Sociology department and she would have been in a better position to build bridges between mainstream social sciences and gender and dalit studies that she thought was her life's mission. I knew her priorities. She never separated the personal, professional and political. But that was Rege – decent but determined, willing for a dialogue but uncompromising when it came to her values and principles.

We all, especially I, have every reason to be angry with her for leaving us in such grief but all of us will remain grateful to her for the legacy she has left behind – a legacy of commitment to a cause and an unassailable commitment to quality, of maintaining an unimpeachable record of intellectual integrity and honesty and above all her unparalleled passion for teaching. For her colleagues, students, researchers and in fact all of us who knew her as a leading feminist theorist-activist teacher, carrying her torch forward will be the real tribute to her memory.