

# Sharmila Rege (1964-2013)

## Tribute to a Phule-Ambedkarite Feminist Welder

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Sociologist, feminist scholar, writer and activist Sharmila Rege was successful in bringing the structural violence of caste and its linkages with sexuality and labour into the feminist discourse. She made the Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre of Pune University into a vibrant hub which not only gained from other disciplines but also created a bilingual system of teaching and training along with a unique syllabus that deserves to be emulated widely.

We are unable yet to come to terms with the untimely passing of our dear friend Sharmila Rege. Her many lives included being a member of the advisory group for the Review of Women's Studies (rws) of the *Economic & Political Weekly*. Indeed, one of her last public offerings was to have made possible the most recent rws on Caste and Gender (4 May 2013). This collection of essays brings together some of Sharmila's abiding interests – the structural violence of caste and its linkages with sexuality and labour. The questions posed in the brief introduction are the questions the corpus of Sharmila's oeuvre leaves us with – and without – any immediate answers: How may we imagine the transformatory role of the dalit feminist perspective? How will (or should) mainstream Indian feminism respond to this fundamental challenge? How do we deepen the debate on intersectionality and move forward to build solidarities? Sharmila was deeply concerned and troubled by the multiple, often divisive, political imperatives flowing from the developments of the 1990s. Her academic and activist engagements called repeatedly for re-thinking and new imaginations, plural and multi-vocal conversations, debate, argument and creative differences.

In the United States (us), an edited volume titled *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (published in 1983) was part of a transformative moment in the us women's movement's relationship to the politics of race and colour, one of the most divisive issues of the time. It is the image of the "bridge" evoked by its editors Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (pioneering feminists who also died much too soon) that applies so perfectly to Sharmila and her work. Sharmila was a bridge in every way conceivable – in her writing, her

teaching and her activism. Bridges are needed precisely because we are separated from each other, and can only be joined when we recognise and acknowledge the presence of disagreement if not antagonism. Sharmila's work on caste and gender took the form of a series of dialogues – between movements, and between women, divided by their caste location and experiences. This was already in evidence in her classic essay on a dalit feminist standpoint, which offered one diagnosis of what ailed the Indian women's movement.

### Dalit Feminist Standpoint

In this important early essay, Sharmila sets out the field of the dalit feminist standpoint position as an emancipatory one that "places emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups", mindful of hierarchy and power relations which construct such groups. She explores the complexity of the category of "dalit woman", in the process foregrounding the need to craft the dalit feminist liberatory project as one that brings into sharp focus the specific and multiple ways in which gender, race, class, caste and sexuality construct each other.

The simultaneous centrality of this essay to both the feminist and the Phule-Ambedkarite anti-caste corpus in India derives from the fact that it posits an epistemological shift in the historiography of social protest at both ends. The dalit feminist standpoint that will effect this shift, Sharmila argues, emerges from a dialogue between the practices and struggles of dalit women and the works of dalit feminist intellectuals on the one hand, and the experiences and ideas of other groups "who must educate themselves about the histories, the preferred social relations and utopias and the struggles of the marginalised", on the other (Rege 1998: ws 45).

Elsewhere, she argues that this very location of the dalit feminist standpoint within the lifeworlds of dalit women is by definition sensitive to structural differences in access to land and livelihood mediated by caste and calibrated to a history of "lokayatas" – the division between intellectual and manual labour structured by caste (Rege 2000: 492).

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Her work on popular culture breaks new ground in our understanding of cultural politics. What is the place of caste based forms of cultural labour in the dialectics of cultural struggle? What are the interconnections between struggles over cultural meaning and struggles for survival? What are the specific ways in which cultural labour may be gendered? (Rege 2002: 1040)

### Writing Caste/Writing Gender

In *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios* (2006), Sharmila plunged into a full-scale exploration of the political significance and possibilities of the "dalit feminist standpoint" for the reinvention of both feminist and anti-caste politics. This book represented nine life-narratives of dalit women activists in the dominated-caste assertions in Maharashtra, which span nearly the whole of the 20th century. She strongly contextualised them in history, politics, and the radical anti-caste cultural activism of the dalit counter-publics of the region. Sharmila chose to describe these accounts as "testimonies" to distinguish them from bourgeois-individualist notions of autobiography, to mark their stories as not reducible to the journey of an individual consciousness.

Testimonies allowed her the fullest exploration of the dalit feminist viewpoint as a dialogue about the space that not just separated the self and the other but also connected – without uniting – them. This, she remarked, is a genre in which "the individual self seeks affirmation in a collective mode". But by bringing the details of one's life into the public domain, the creator of the *testimonio* also asserts herself against the community's control over the self (2006: 14). It is not a coincidence, therefore, that she often places single inverted commas around the word translation when it appears in the book. For the work was essentially about "translation" in the multiple senses of the word, about the risky task of working on the borders, tight-rope walking in order to make possible the building of bridges over many divides.

Interestingly, even the familiar conventions in book-writing were reinterpreted in terms of the practices of the

dalit/bahujan counter-publics, to which the book gave extensive attention. Thus in the acknowledgements page, she mentions that the practice of revering non-brahminical thinkers and practitioners by evoking their names is a characteristic of dalit/bahujan gatherings in Maharashtra. Through this the speaker placed herself within this tradition. Sharmila turns her acknowledgement page into an occasion for such practice and thereby locates herself within this radical anti-caste tradition "of acknowledging situatedness, positionality, and the collective process of knowledge-making" (2006: ix).

The book opened up new vistas for feminism and women's studies as for dalit studies and dalit feminism, but it also challenged conventional disciplines, especially history, in fundamental ways. Methodologically, its unabashed linking of historical knowledge-creation to immediate political ends and its use of testimonios as historical sources threw a challenge to entrenched values of neutrality and objectivity. Also, it strengthened and extended the questioning initiated by feminist history of dominant frameworks by challenging the privileging of nationalism in making sense of the 20th century history of the region/nation.

### Debating Cultural Politics

Most importantly perhaps, the testimonios in the book represent the seizing of an opportunity: to narrate lives as an enabling practice of the self that dissolves petrified identities of self and community, and reorganise visibility in the political field through ethically-compelling modes of speaking the hitherto unspoken. In this sense, the thrust towards constructing empowering histories remains highly relevant for other regions with other histories of gender and caste as well, where dalit people continue to be politically subordinated and rendered into either "agricultural labour" or ossified and passive recipients of welfare, mere governmental categories.

Sharmila's theoretical and political preoccupation has thus been with understanding how women are divided, what divides them and also "what connects them but does not easily unite them" (Rege 2000: 493). To her, the internal

critique is indispensable to the praxis of a dalit feminist standpoint. Recognising that contestations are at the core of robust politics, Sharmila was deeply committed to dialogue across differences – of social location, of identities – as a way of strengthening anti-caste feminist politics. She was committed to dialogue, public debate and an ethics of disagreement in the hope of real learning and the building of solidarities, however back-breaking the effort.

Naturally such a stance evoked considerable debate both from feminists unused to thinking about their caste as well as from dalit women, suspicious about the possibility of a dalit standpoint on the part of non-dalits. What is sometimes lost sight of is that her work took the risk of creating the means for such debate.

Her desire to take further risks has broken new ground in her most recent publication *Against the Madness of Manu: Writings on Brahminical Patriarchy by B.R. Ambedkar* (2013). Here it is the work of Babasaheb Ambedkar that becomes the conduit for a larger dialogue. Sharmila simultaneously questioned the telling lack of engagement from a growing number of male scholars working on Ambedkar who simply neglected the fundamental role of gender in the making and reproduction of caste. In the book she invites feminists to take on Ambedkar's unique thinking on gender equality and the roots of discrimination.

At the core of her writing is the effort to foreground challenges by the radical intellectual and cultural traditions of Phule-Ambedkarite, non-brahmin movements to the brahmanisation of knowledge and cultural politics. Her purpose was to explore the potential for transformative pedagogies in the social sciences, placing the regional university at the centre (Rege 2002), as a space for deliberation, teaching and learning about cultural politics.

### KSP Women's Studies Centre

While her writings are justifiably widely read and much discussed (many of the essays published in the EPW), less is known about her dedication to building bridges through pedagogy and language. At a time of growing fatigue if not cynicism, when report after report on the

state of higher education in India has been bemoaning its decline, the Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre (KSPWSC), institutionally fragile and marginal, has for many years been actually practising what others only wish for – combining quality with equality.

The trajectory and growth of the University Grants Commission (UGC)-sponsored KSPWSC at the University of Pune, to which Sharmila made a phenomenal contribution, is a living testimony of her institution-building capacity, and also equally significantly, the core values of feminism that guide the work of KSPWSC as a women's studies institution.

KSPWSC under Sharmila took up the challenge of re-imagining the role and place of women's studies in higher education. The location of the Centre within a state university, but sponsored by the UGC, meant that it had to address the macro and micro politics of women's studies in higher education. This included negotiating the tension between UGC guidelines for women's studies and local university politics with respect to women's studies. In addition, two defining characteristics of our times had also to be contended with, namely, the changing social composition of students and researchers and the growing anxiety about the "employability" of students.

The significant milestones in the history of KSPWSC since its inception at the University of Pune in the Department of Sociology in 1987 gives an idea of how Sharmila and her team innovatively dealt with the challenges before higher education in this country. In 1995 KSPWSC started a part-time postgraduate certificate programme in English and Marathi. Designed around four core components of feminist theory (social history of the region, culture and politics, and development studies), this course promoted sustained debate on language, region and practice of women's studies. In 1998, the Centre was made autonomous, leading to a sudden dislocation from a disciplinary dwelling characterised by Sharmila as leading to a feeling of being "lost to one's discipline" (Rege 2011).

At the beginning of 2000, pressures of accreditation forced undergraduate colleges to float "vocational/practical"

courses. The Centre viewed this as an opportunity to introduce teaching programmes in women's studies at the undergraduate level: A three-month off-campus certificate course in women and development was offered alternately on rural and urban college campuses. In 2002 when the University of Pune adopted the credit-semester system, the Centre began offering credit courses in women's studies across disciplines. Thus each of the teaching programmes of the Centre emerged in response to the need to prove the academic credibility and relevance of women's studies within the university system.

In 2008, in the context of the perceived "crisis in higher education", the Centre planned an experiment in re-imagining higher education in the humanities and social sciences on the site of women's studies. These interventions emanating organically from the project speak volumes of Sharmila and her team's abiding faith in what can be achieved when "possibilities" are centre staged while "limitations" are not allowed to paralyse the functioning of an institution. If today KSPWSC is foremost among women's studies institutes in the country, a large part of the credit goes to Sharmila, who also "re-imagined" her individual achievement as a scholar integral to the development of the KSPWSC as an institution of scholarly repute and relevance.

### Pedagogy and Language

Through a mind-boggling array of programmes beginning at the undergraduate level (so uncharacteristic for a university centre), Sharmila and her team of colleagues and students have been carefully crafting a bilingual system of teaching and training. Students, some of them first-generation learners, are not only taught to overcome their disadvantage through English language classes, but are treated as creative producers of knowledge in their own right in a bilingual mode. *Building Bridges: On Becoming a Welder* (Rege 2010) is the remarkable title of the first Bridge Course Manual produced under Sharmila's leadership, where the motif of the welder has been taken from one of Cherrie Moraga's poems, here transmuted into welding Phule-Ambedkarite-feminist pedagogies.

Computer lessons, modes of linguistic expression and reflexive thinking about social location are welded together in this unique course, one that deserves to be more widely known and used. The prosaic topic of food and cook-book recipes becomes yet another innovative means whereby students in one of their undergraduate courses explore history, memory, national culture, and poverty through the lens of "taste" and cuisine. One of the results is the bilingual text *Isn't This Plate Indian? Hi thali bharathiye nahi ka?* (ws Class 2009), containing biographical narratives of dalit men and women who were interviewed, the recipes they shared, and diverse students' reflections on what they learnt and how.

Undergraduate teachers were also central to the work of the centre, breaking the common assumption that research only belongs at "higher levels". In the survey-based study *Making Familial Spaces: Lives, Labour and Desires* (Gole and Choudhury, ed. 2011), teachers and students of Fergusson College undid disciplinary and generational boundaries to rethink the meanings of the family and the middle class from the perspective of paid domestic work. In all these efforts what is palpable is that none of them are treated as finished products but rather turn into methods for further questioning.

As anyone who has visited the women's studies centre in Pune can attest, even formal events such as talks and conferences were occasions for vibrant exchanges through an ongoing process of translation, across languages and generations. Most women's studies centres have had to contend with the pain of ghettoisation and in its initial years, the centre in Pune was no exception. Both Vidyut Bhagwat (2002), the first director and Sharmila Rege (1997) have described their travails, and not without humour. Everyone should read Sharmila's essay on the "Monkey and the Crocodile"! But as it grew, the word "centre" acquired real meaning – here was one women's studies centre that had turned into a veritable hub, bringing in others from all around, whether from other departments at the university or from the city and indeed beyond.

Sharmila understood that building institutions in higher education meant

in essence students and teachers. She brought together bright and imaginative minds to the task of the Centre. To be sure, her “team” cannot have imagined that they would so soon lose her leadership. But she herself imagined – even compelled – the continuity of the work to which she so energetically dedicated herself. Sharmila spoke of the work of resisting caste and building an anti-caste Phule-Ambedkarite feminist tradition as one that could be accomplished through a relay race, where the baton passes from one to another to another till the finish line. For her part, she sped through the longest middle in the shortest time, changing the course of the race in her wake, and transforming the character of the relay. We do not know where the finish line may be, but

for all of us, her friends and her “team”, she has left the brilliant light of her inspiration to look and keep running.

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