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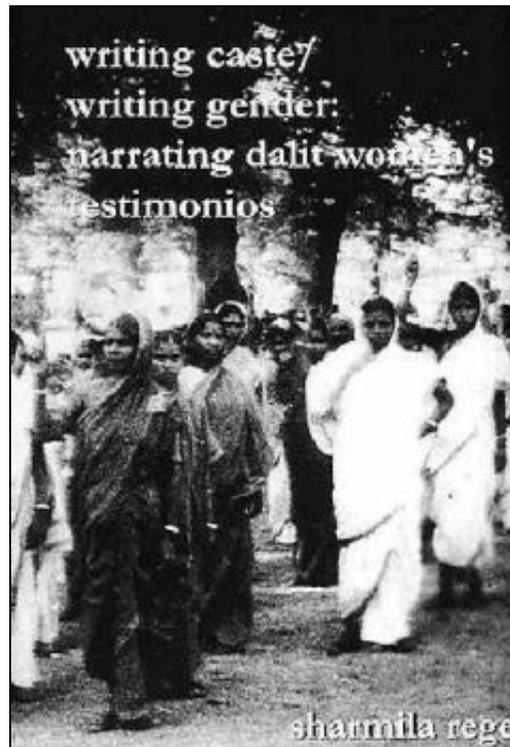
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Engagement with Dalit feminism

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First person accounts of Dalit women bringing alive the profound deprivation they faced and their struggles



WRITING CASTE/WRITING GENDER — Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios: Sharmila Rege; Zubaan, an Imprint of Kali for Women, K-92, I Floor, Hauz Kaus Enclave, New Delhi-110016. Rs.495.

Quite often history is better narrated by the people who actually participate in it. This is a book split into two parts. The first is the historical context through which the author sets the stage for the eight testimonies that make up the second half of the book.

While the author Sharmila Rege has put together a very comprehensive background in the first part, the book, however, really comes alive when the testimonies begin. The women tell it like it is. A

complete smack in the face accounts of their lives. So riveting is the narration that it is difficult to put down the book until their stories are finished. For a non-fiction academic work this is no small feat.

History

Following the recent spate of atrocities on Dalits in Maharashtra and the consequent flare up within the community against the establishment the book becomes particularly relevant.

In her introduction, Rege, a well-known sociologist in Maharashtra explains that the book is part of project that has an objective of fulfilling a pedagogical function in the area of gender and Dalit studies. Discussions and research point to "the need for putting together teaching and learning material that can promote political and interpretative engagement with issues of caste." She says while examining curricula of universities in Maharashtra, one of the findings were that there was a near total absence of the politics of lived experience of caste in the courses. Rege's work seems an attempt to address this void.

In setting the stage, which is titled "Debating the Consumption of Dalit `Autobiographies'— The Significance of Dalit `Testimonios'," the author goes into an exhaustive discussion about the gender, class and caste movement in Maharashtra. Here she outlines the Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, pre-Ambedkar and post-Ambedkar eras of the movement. She also places the history of the caste structure and consequent struggle in Maharashtra over here, which is essential to understand the Dalit and Dalit feminist evolution. What seems pertinent here is Rege's examination of Dalit women's issues entering the public sphere.

Although the extensive details are credible, Rege's background chapter is unfortunately immersed in thick academic jargon that tends to make the language very dense. For academics it may not be too difficult to plough through the material but a student or lay reader could find it tedious.

The testimonies

When the eight narratives do begin, the reader is thrown into a world filled with so much misery and sadness, that you are left staggered as to how anyone could achieve anything out of this wretchedness. What seems frightening is that even though some of the stories took place many years ago, you realise that parts of it are still happening today.

The testimonies span a period beginning from the 1920s to the present. By listing the narratives chronologically, Rege manages to highlight the different phases within the Dalit feminist movement, caste battles and the other socio-economic issues. For example, Babytai Kamble and Shantabai Kamble's stories talk about the life of the Mahar community in the pre-Ambedkar era and the transformation that came with the emergence of the Ambedkar movement, while Shantabai Dani and Kumud Pawade speak of gender issues. Rege also picks two women from nomadic tribes to talk about patriarchy issues and the suffering faced by homeless people. It's interesting how the author points out the significance the Dalit women's struggles within the struggle of the Dalit movement.

Deprivation

A commonality among all the narratives is the profound deprivation faced by each woman: extreme poverty, hunger, domestic violence and the worst tag of all — being an untouchable. It is remarkable how the women overcome the most wretched odds to not only become literate but go on to help the community by concentrating on the importance of education, which they say is the only tool towards upliftment.

The stories, which read easily almost as if the women are in conversation with the reader, have several powerful and poignant moments.

Here is a sample of Shantabai Dani's struggle. She was the only Mahar girl in her college. From day one, the other girls discriminated against her. Everyone ate in the common hall. But she was not allowed to enter and would be served in the verandah outside the hall. She would be served at a distance and would eat alone. She recalls: "the bakri would be thrown down into my plate from a distance. The curry used to be served with a serving spoon kept at a distance from my plate... "

The testimonies leave you with a lasting feeling. Never again will you look at a manual labourer, homeless person, scavenger or even a beggar in the insensitive or dismissive light that one tends to do sometimes.

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