



## WRITING CASTE/ WRITING GENDER:PERSPECTIVE OF SHARMILA REGE

### Abstract

Tracing the history of women's movement and Prof. Sharmila Rege contribution, incidentally happened to be second generation of the feminist scholar: The 1970's decade happened to be the crucial decade during which the academic discussion on women's issues in India began with the pioneering works or writing of women scholars like Professors Neera Desai, Maitreyi Krishnaraj, Jasodhara Bagachi, Iravati Karve and Vena Mujumdar. This was by Professors Lela Dube, Karuna Chanana etc. which led the government of India to invite some of these scholars to bring out a classical book called "Towards Equality in India"(1974). Soon women's study movement was joined by Professors Susie Tharu, Vandana Shiva and several such women scholars but all these scholars being inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's book "The Second Sex" and of few women's movement organised by European and American women activists which considered Indian women as a homogenies gender category and did not pay much attention on the issues of Indian women across the cultures, regions, castes and communities. It was perhaps Professor Sharmila Rege, representing the second generation of feminist scholars who for the first time realize the diversified nature of problems of the women as a gender category across the cultures, religion, castes, classes and communities.

**Key words :** Caste, Gender, Feminist Movement, Sharmila Rege

### Introduction

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### About sharmila rege

Being born in Kolhapur District on 7<sup>th</sup> October 1964 and brought up at Pune where she got education from Ferguson College and Department of Sociology, University of Pune. Since 1991 she was lecturer in the Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre which was part of Department of Sociology from 1989 to 2002. In 2005 she became Professor in Department of Sociology, University of Pune. She was also associated

with Indian Institute of Technology, Mumbai for short period as Professor of Sociology. She received the Malcolm Adiseshiah award for distinguished contribution to development studies from the Madras Institute of Development studies (MIDS) in 2006. From 2008 onwards, she was Director of Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre, University of Pune.

She had published on gender and sociology, dalit feminism and social history of popular cultural practices in Marathi and English. She has published a series of essays on the history of African- American feminisms and several booklets and music cultures of Ambedkarite counter publics and pedagogical issues in Dalit cultural studies. Her major publications includes of *Sociology of Gender: The Challenge of Feminist Sociological Thought*, (2003) Sage publications, Second book, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios*, (2006) Zubaan publication, and her last published book, *Against the Madness of Manu: B.R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy*, Navyana publications (2013). The secondary source of her books is the base of his article. The method of content analysis is carried to understand gender in sociology, feminist movement, dalit feminist standpoint and brahmanical patriarchy.

### **Conceptual understanding : Sociology of gender**

Broadly, speaking, Prof Rege say, one is constantly confronted with the question of the location of sociology of women and of gender on the periphery or the margins and on the academic borderlands of sociology. She identifies three broad responses of Indian sociologists to accommodate feminist contributions, namely, inclusion, separatism and reconceptualization. Adding to these, the pedagogical implications of these deserve to be considered seriously. While the debate about the space to be given to gender in sociology goes on, the question that has to be addressed is whether sociology of gender has been allowed to grow organically within the sociology curriculum or whether the 'engendering of sociology' has taken place or not. Rege refers to the pre-institutionalisation phase of sociology as 'more than a sociology of absences of women'. The institutionalized phase of sociology has yet to give full recognition to the scholarship generated by these developments. The introduction provides an interface between gender issues and sociology. It also raises the issues of the margin, the periphery and the centre without diverting the main focus from gender. It will undoubtedly give a historical perspective to the understanding of the sociology of gender and push forward the frontiers of feminist knowledge. The invaluable book on *Sociology of Gender: The Challenge of Feminist Sociological Thought*, maps the contributions made by feminist scholars towards engendering mainstream sociological discourse in India. It covers a broad range of issues relating to the lifespan of women in different social institutions such as the family, school and the workplace. This book is one of the Indian Sociological Society: Golden Jubilee Volumes.

### **Caste and Gender**

Second book, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios*, (2006) Zubaan publication, explores the Dalit feminist standpoint using the life-narratives, or testimonios, of eight Dalit women from the 1920's until today.

The feminism in India is a set of movements intended to definely establish and defend equal which are socio-cultural, political and economic rights for equal opportunities for Indian women. It is the pursuit of women's rights within the society of India. Like their feminist counterparts all over the world, feminists in India seek gender equality in terms of the right to work for equal wages, the right to equal access to health and education, and equal political rights. The Indian feminists also have strongly fought against culture-specific issues within India's patriarchal society, such as inheritance laws and the practice of widow immolation known as Sati.

The history of feminism in India can be seen into three phases: the first phase, begin in the mid-nineteenth century, when male European colonists began to speak out against the social evils of Sati; the second phase, started from 1915 till Indian independence, when Gandhiji incorporated participation of women in the Quit India movement and that is how an independent women's organisations began to emerge; and finally, the third phase, which is post-independence, has focused on fair treatment of women at home, after marriage, in the work force and right to political parity.

But despite of this progress made by Indian feminist movements, women living in modern India still face many issues of inequality, discrimination and social exclusion. India's patriarchal culture has made the process of gaining equality in house with dignity, economic or land-ownership rights and access to education are challenging. In the past two decades, there has also emerged a disturbing trend of sex-selective abortion in the name of honor, security or economic burden. To Indian feminists, these are seen as injustices worth struggling against.

As in the West, there has been some criticism of feminist movements in India also. They have especially been criticised for focusing too much on women already privileged, and neglecting the needs and representation of poorer or lower caste women. This has led to the creation of caste-specific feminist organisations and movements. This is discussed in the book on Writing Caste / Writing Gender: Narrating dalit women's testimonios.

### **Difference, challenges and brahmanical feminism**

It is seen that since the 1980's caste identity and caste consciousness have dominated the political scene, and theoretical and political issues concerned with the role of caste in social transformation are at the centre of political debates. There is articulation of 'difference' that challenges brahmanical feminism to review its theories, methodologies and praxis. Dalit women become the defining point which the normative/unmarked status of 'upper caste' feminism is challenged. Such a dalit feminist standpoint interrogates the feminist positions (unmarked by caste) asking them to review their 'difference' by clearly marking theses feminisms as brahmanical feminism. The theory and practice of women's studies has, from its inception, underscored the relation between knowing and transforming, dalit feminism qualifies this further. It places at the centre women who have an interest in overthrowing the system and rising within it.

Dalit and some bahujan feminists have begun to explicitly state their contestations of the original status of unmarked feminism and have argued that there have been broadly two paths to feminism - brahmani and abrahmani/bahujanvaadi. This period has also seen assertions of what has been named as dalit/ dalitbahujan/abrahmani/Phule Ambedkarite feminism. Guru (1995) argues that to understand dalit women's need differently, because he underscores the significance of social location in determining the perception of reality and therefore the representation of dalit women's issues by non-dalit women is less valid and less authentic

### **Re-orientation of feminist analysis**

In the 1990's decade, there has been considerable rethinking and re-orientation of received frames of feminist analysis. In the aftermath of the anti-Mandal agitation, feminist scholarship conceptualised brahmanical patriarchy (Chakravarti, 1993) in an effort to define and clarify the links between caste and gender. Commenting on the lack of feminist engaging with the writings and works of Ambedkar, scholars sought to map Ambedkar's articulation of the women's question in India (Pardeshi1997; Jogdand 1998). The separate roads to feminism were mapped and conceptualised a feminisms- brahmanical and non-

brahmanical, as said by Kamble Lata in 2000 publication. Scholars like Iliah (1996) Thakur (1996) in varying ways underlined the democratic character of dalitbahujan patriarchies, critiquing the homogenizing effects of brahmanical conceptions. Jalli (2003) has underscored the need to deconstruct theories to dissect the whole epistemology produced by upper caste intellectuals. Dalit feminists conceptualisations, she argues, “would not contradict with the realities of their co-others of the land. This makes the dalit feminist perception more incorporative than the mainstream feminist or dalit male theories”. This potential of dalit feminism to emerge as an integrated counter epistemology is confirmed by Mehmi’s (2003) analysis of the implications for dalit women of the transformations in the dalit community in Punjab both at the level of developmental statistics and the everyday. Some of the non-dalit feminist scholar, like Sharmila Rege (2003) underline the need to “unflinchingly view and analyse our histories of silence and separation”.

Prof. Rege was been searching dalit feminist voices in spaces and times predefined by upper caste feminisms. In doing so, She in her own words ‘as a non-dalit woman, the process of ‘translating’ the testimonies of dalit women in this book has meant addressing my own ignorance about their histories, struggles, preferred social relations and utopias. It means challenging the normative epistemological status of unmasked feminism, recognising its social situation to be scientifically and epistemologically disadvantaged one for generating knowledge. Prof Rege adds for many of us whose journey into feminism began with unmasked feminist theories and practices, a dalit feminist standpoint offers an opportunity for more emancipator modernity. It rejected more completely the relations of rule (Brahmanism, middle class fractured modernity) in which we participated and in which our oppression as gateways of the caste system is inherent.

### **Dalit feminist standpoint**

For her, adopting a dalit feminist standpoint means sometimes losing, sometimes revisioning, the ‘voice’ that we have as unmasked feminists. Non-dalit feminist cannot ‘speak as’ or ‘for’ dalit women but they can ‘reinvent themselves’ as dalit feminist. A transformation from ‘their cause’ to ‘our cause’ is possible for subjectivities can be transformed. Prof Rege believes, it is a process, one of transforming individual feminist into oppositional and collective subjects of common democratic struggles. Writing Caste/Writing Gender is an invitation to critically and systematically interrogate advantage positions and to reorient the histories and future of feminism.

Rege’s work in developing a ‘Dalit Standpoint Perspective’ has been crucial in opening up feminist debates in India to questions of class, caste, religion and sexuality. A dalit feminist standpoint acknowledges the significance of the experience of oppression and resistance among dalit women acquiring a perspective against an unjust order but it does not celebrate oppressive traditions merely because they are practiced by the oppressed. By directing attention to the cultural and material dimensions of the interface between gender and caste, focus of a dalit feminist standpoint is squarely placed on social relations, which convert difference into oppression. Such a view points to the failure of upper caste women to critically and systematically interrogate their situation of advantage. The structural and individual dimensions of caste are often ‘invisible’ from privileged positions and require a ‘conscious’ effort to problematise the complexly constituted social locations that women occupy.

Just adding axis of patriarchy an axis of caste oppression, assumes that gender can be isolated from caste and that is the last instance there is something (some form of oppression) that is ‘common’ to all women. Again, in the name of a commonality of interests, women who occupy social locations that are advantaged in the caste and class terms and are subjected to only gender-based oppression are considered normative. This often means non-dalit women talking ad nauseam about the difference of dalit women in

terms of their being ' thrice/twice oppressed' but their oppression as women continues to be seen as shared in common. It is as if the 'difference' of dalit women exists in some separable 'non-women' (caste) part of them: 'Translating' dalit women's historical experience, in writing caste/ writing gender, underscores the inseparability of caste and gender identities and the material and symbolic gains of complicity for upper caste women and undifferentiated community for dalit men.

This book makes important contributions to the fields of pedagogy, life-narratives, and caste and gender. Rege believed that this Dalit feminist standpoint is the most emancipatory among the multiple feminisms in operation (including elite brahmanical feminism). In doing this the Rege urges readers to rethink conceptualizations of Dalit feminism as something new, something that has 'emerged' out of the exclusionary practices of what is known as mainstream feminism and the presumed 'silent' years of Dalit feminism. Further, she points to the necessity and importance of rethinking the received theoretical frameworks of caste and gender.

### **Ambedkar's role in the women's movement**

In her last published book, *Against the Madness of Manu: B.R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy*, Navyana publications (2013), sought to centralize Ambedkar's role in the women's movement by invoking his ideological fight against Brahminical patriarchy, and how the caste system engenders graded violence against women. In this book, it is said that, feminist readings of Ambedkar are enabled by this conjuncture that has opened up possibilities of a new dialogue between Phule-Ambedkarite, dalit feminist and non-dalit feminist perspectives. She says, a feminist turn to Ambedkar thus seeks to reclaim and renovate his theoretical articulations to understand how brahmanical patriarchy fashions sameness, intersection, discreteness, and descending contempt. And adds, such an approach to Ambedkar can help produce a generative structure through which an alliance between feminist and anti-caste/dalit groups with visions of liberatory politics can be engaged –both within and outside academia. Prof Rege says, recovering Ambedkar's writing as feminist classics draws both from their authorial brilliance and the possibilities opened up by contemporary appropriations. This calls for confronting confusing, diverse, and heterogeneous sources of knowledge across different locations-social, institutional and epistemic.

In this case, she shall argue that assorted sources like musical compositions and booklets that circulate within the spaces constituted by Ambedkarite calendar would reveal that the reclaiming of a feminist Ambedkar has a much longer and richer history outside the academia. She outlined the contours of the rich discourses of booklets and songs on Ambedkar and women's questions.

### **Conclusion**

Rege's sad demise is a great loss to social sciences in general and sociological analysis of diversified gender issues in particular. With these words I pay my richest homage to late Professor Sharmila Rege. At last, remind of her interest of Ambedkarite calendar events, documentations of booklets and music cultures of Ambedkarite counterpublics and pedagogical issues in dalit cultural studies to be taken forward.

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