

Development of Gender Historiography in Maharashtra : Articulations of Dr. Sharmila Rege

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Introduction : Gender History is a very recent trend in historiography. As we all familiar about the fact that history is a discipline which have been constantly developing throughout the ages . Every present moment becomes the part of history just at next moment therefore history is a continuous developing stream of knowledge. Gender history is one of the major new trend recently added in History. Still it's methodology is under construction . various scholars like Uma Chakravarty , Sudesh Vaidy , Kumkum Sangari , V. Githa , amla Bhasin are constantly trying their best for constructing the gender awareness perspective in their respective fields of knowledge in India, Whether it is by product of women's studies or sociology or history is not that much matter, what is really important is their constant effort for creating awareness about Gender equality in the society for better living condition of women at all. Particularly when we talk about the Maharashtra scholars who had great contribution towards the development of Gender studies and Historiography , we had to point out the names such as Comrade Sharad Patil, Dr. Neera Desai, Dr. Sharmila Rege , Dr. Vidyut Bhgawat, Dr. wandana Sonalkar , Dr. Gopal Guru , Dr. Dilip Chavahan etc. In this research paper I would like to focus on the contribution of great feminist scholar Dr. Sharmila Rege's articulation on Gender History and gender Historiography.

Dr. Shrmila Rege :

Dr. Shrmila Rege was a very prominent name in the scholarship of women's studies and gender history of Maharashtra. She had born on the 7th October 1964 in the city of Kolhapur which had known by the name of great social reformer king Chatrapati Shahu Maharaj. She had bring and bought up in the another popular city which is known as a knowledge hub of Maharashtra , that is Pune . She had her schooling at Pune and after that joined the Ferguson college , best college of the Pune city at that time , which had also a great tradition of scholar such as Maharshi Vitthal Ramji Shinde . Sociology was her special subject in which she had her graduation and post graduation. Since the year 1991 she had started her carrier in teaching field as a faculty of the sociology, department of Pune University, recently renamed as the *Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Pune University* . At that time the popular women's studies center which is named after the great social reformer and first female teacher *Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule*, was a part of the Department of Sociology . In the year 1998 *Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Center* became anonymous . At that time Sharmila had the feeling of "being lost to one's discipline ' . In the year 2005, Sharmila Rege had became a professor at the Department of Sociology at the *University of Pune*. She had hand over the charge as a director to the *Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Centre* in the year 2008. Her tenure had a remarkable development in the women's studies. She had opened up very crucial debate and scholarship in the field of Dalit Feminism as well as the study of caste and gender. She was not only a renowned academician but also a great social activist and student friendly teacher. As a honor for her valuable contribution to development studies, she had received the prestigious *Malcom Adishesiah* award in 2006 from the *Madras*

Institute of Development Studies (MIDS). Unfortunately she didn't have the sufficient time to serve the intellectual discipline of gender studies and reconstruction of dalit feminism . She had passed away on 13 July 2013 due to the dieses of colon cancer . Her sad demise was huge loss of scholarship of women studies in general and gender Historiography in particular.

In the field of women's studies and gender history, Shrmila Rege had great contribution as a prominent scholar of Maharashtra , who had due reorganization on the national level galaxy of women studies scholars . What is the difference of scholarship of Sharmila Rege then other gender sociologist or gender historian is the major question. In search of the answer of this question we may able to understand the uniqueness of the contribution of Dr. shrmila Rege into the Construction of gender history. She had not only observed but criticized the contemporary so called white colored middle and upper caste feminism by the perspectives of Caste and Class and Gender (CCG) . Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was her intellectual hero from her childhood . She had followed the theoretical legacy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and accepted him as a role model for the construction of Gender History. Being a scholar of sociology she had worked a lot for the development of sociology of gender but simultaneously she had also written various research books which helps to develop the gender history. In Indian scholarship we can find two prominent perspectives , which have been continuous since the inception of this country. Among them first perspective is Brahmanical perspective and other is Non- Brahmanical perspective. Every discipline and every stream of knowledge is somehow get affected by either of them. Women's studies was also not exceptional for that, and to be frankly speaking it is not only affected by Brahmanical , white color , middle class perspective but it was really dominated by the Brhmanical pearspective. Sharmila Rege had drawn the attention of scholars towards that fact and demand for the inclusion of the concerns of Dalit , Bahujan women of India in mainstream women's studies. That is the major difference we should consider about Sharmila's scholarship. Her work can be classified into three major fields for easy understanding; first field of her work is obviously sociology. Second domain of her intellectual interest and very closed to her heart was women's studies and third section of her work was active participation into the each and every kind of the women's movement for the rights of women in general and Dalit women in particularly . Dr. Sharmila Rege was not only a mare academician but an active activist of women movement in Maharashtra. Sharmila Rege was one of the leading feminist scholars in India, whose 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. Rege's work within the academia, to fight for the right of the Dalit student's rights, has been a testimony of her commitment to critical educational reform in India. Her concerns around the woman's question in India, contributed greatly to new and alternative methods of historiography, exposing the blind-spots of a Hindu Nation towards the Dalit voices and perspectives that have often been neglected in the political milieu of India's history.¹ She had contributed various research books in the development of Gender Historiography .

Dr. Sharmila Rege was a renowned professor of sociology , obviously her research is in sociology but she had not just studied the subject of sociology but she had located the intrinsically relation between the sociology and Gender . Sociology of Gender: The Challenge of Feminist Sociological Thought is one of the most popular work published in the year 2003 by well known Sage publications. This invaluable reader maps the contribution made by feminist scholars towards engendering

mainstream sociological discourses 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 workplace . Recently every stream of knowledge in general and various disciplines of social science and humanities in particular, have been trying to reinterpret their knowledge in the Gender perspective. Sociology is also not exceptional for that. Intellectual discourses and debates have been going on the relation between sociology and Gender, what should be the importance and actual space of Gender in the study of sociology is going on and on till today . Sociologist and researchers have thinking whether the study of gender should be the part of sociology or it should tackle separately? In that regard Dr Sharmila Rege had strongly argued about engendering of sociology. When she had opened up the discussion she had put the realities of to the pre-institutionalization 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.²

Dr. Sharmila Rege had done research and written on the crucial conceptualizations of society such as Gender, caste, dalit feminism standpoint view etc within the historical perspective. Dalit feminism was also one of the prior sections of her intellectual interest. In that regards *Writing Caste Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios*, was her leading work published in the year 2006, by the Zubaan publication , New Delhi . In this book she had discussed deeply the Dalit feminist standpoint perception . In this direction Rege went on and described the theory of Standpoint which had based on the ‘experiences’ personally experienced and narrated by the dalit women. After her scholarly introduction of the book she had described the contemporary social status of Maharashtra . An introduction to Gender, Caste and class formation of Maharashtra, articulation of the women’s question in the Satyashodhk and non Brahman public spheres during 1850-1930, articulation of caste class gender in Ambedkarite movement and articulation of caste question in women’s writing during 1880-1930 had discussed very clearly in her notable work. *Writing caste Writing gender* is a testimonials of eight Dalit women’s biographies. Shantabai Dani’s (1919-2001) *Ratrandini Amha* , Mukta Sravagod’s (1922-2004) *Mitleli Kavade*, Shantabai Kamble’s(1923) *majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* , Baby Kamble’s (1929) *Jine Amuche* , Kumud Pawade’s(1938) *Antasphot*, Urmila Chakurkar’s (1945) *Aaidan*, Janabai Girhe’s(1958) *Marankala* , Vimal More’s (1970) *Tin dagdachi chul* are the autobiographies discussed at the caste and Gender perspective in this book . She argues that the complex and conflicting relations between the women’s question and the caste question suggest the need to interrogate historically the frames of reference that assume narratives of mutual exclusions or erasures. As Uma Charavarti pointed out that Since the second half of the nineteenth century, gender had become a crucial factor in the splitting of the middle class constituted by the upper castes, mainly the Brahmins of Pune and Mumbai. While one section pushed the reform agenda and sought to shape the identity of the class as a whole, the other, larger,

section resisted these attempts strength of resistance to widow remarriage and other gender issues lay in the fact that it represented the adoption of lower caste models for higher castes. Thus, gender remained the most divisive issue, causing internal splits in the Brahman and middle classes till it was replaced by political strategies and nationalism in the last decade of the century³ Shrmila Rege had also discussed caste based difference of womanhood into the Indian society. All women are not equal in the category of women in the Indian patriarchal structure and therefore she had discussed the challenges to the Feminism and particularly Brahmanical feminism and patriarchy. She had quoted one incident which had shown that not only in society but in women's organization itself had the caste discrimination. Anjanabai Deshbhratar, who attended the Nagpur Conference of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in 1938, comments, "The Savarna sister's behavior towards their untouchable sisters was distant, cold, mean and of lowly attitude. During the lunch hour, the untouchable women delegates – Jaibai and others – had been asked to sit aside and had felt humiliated. ' ⁴ Conference of Ambedkarite women at Nagpur had condemned this act of the AIWC's through a resolution and announced the setting up of the Srimati Ramabai Ambedkar Sangh. The third 'All India Untouchable Women's Conference' in 1945 critiqued the agenda of the AIWC as being hollow and underscored the need for a separate organization of untouchable women ⁵ In this important work she had underlined the intrinsically linkage between the caste and gender. She had also attracted the attention of scholars towards the threefold subordination and exploitation of dalit women on the name of cast, class and gender . As she argued that a dalit feminist standpoint is seen as emancipator since the subject of its knowledge is embodied and visible (i e, the thought begins from the lives of dalit women and these lives are present and visible in the results of the thought). This position argues that it is more emancipatory than other existing positions and counters pluralism and relativism by which all knowledge based and political claims are thought to be valid in their own way. It places emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups and focuses on the hierarchical, multiple, changing structural power relations of caste, class, ethnic, which construct such a group. It is obvious that the subject/agent of dalit women's standpoint is multiple, heterogeneous even contradictory, i e, that the category 'dalit woman' is not homogenous - such a recognition underlines the fact that the subject of dalit feminist libratory knowledge must also be the subject of every other libratory project and this requires a sharp focus on the processes by which gender, race, class, caste, sexuality - all construct each other.⁶

Against the Madness of Manu: B.R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy, unfortunately this was the last book , scholarly written by Dr. Sharmila Rege . This was first published in the year 2013 by the Navyana publications , New Delhi. At the very outset in her acknowledgement she had written that " This book is for Pappa for making Babasaheb my childhood hero through the memories of his early years at Siddharth College ; Ambedkari Shahirs and gayan parties, scholars and activists of the Phule-Ambedkarite movement for introducing me to the life and work of Babasaheb and its many interpretations; and students at the University of Pune on " Dalits and the public sphere ' and "Gender and caste: History and memory ' for making me believe that I could do this book⁷ While we look at her acknowledgement we can easily understand her love , respect and faith into the Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar as she called him as her 'childhood hero' , she had greatly influenced by the entire personality , writings and methodology of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar which she

had always accepted and declared proudly in various speeches. She had emphasized on the contribution of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar into the women's empowerment in general and Dalit women in particular, first time in women's studies in Maharashtra. She had also argued very strongly about the ideology of Babasaheb's entire struggle against the Brahmanical patriarchy, caste system, rights of Dalit man and women. She had posed the specific gender methodology to unveil the contribution of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar for engendering the caste through the *gayan parties*, *shihiris* and *the booklets* as a historical sources to construct the gender historiography in the Ambedkrite perspective. Renowned Gender Historian Uma Chakravarti had argued about the great contribution of Sharmila Rege that, "Through her work on caste and the issues she raised, she forced metropolitan feminists to first read and then think about caste before they jumped into take positions on controversial issues generated all around us"⁸ Prominent scholar Gopal Guru remarked about her contribution of that Sharmila Rege provides us a theoretical advanced interpretation of Babasaheb's thinking on the interstices of the caste and feminist questions. Rege's work assumes significance especially in the context of limited engagement with caste in mainstream feminism.⁹ Sharmila Rege had opened up a serious intellectual discourse in Gender History by the caste perspective in her introduction under the title *Towards a feminist Reclamation*. Pointing out towards the attitude of mainstream white color feminism towards dalit women she had argued that dalit women have been suffer ten time more than upper caste women. In the absence of adequate focus on the links between caste and gender, the 2006 Khairlanji case has once again proved how violence against dalit women comes to be inscribed as either 'caste atrocity' or 'sexual atrocity'. The challenge therefore to reclaim Ambedkar's theoretical legacy that viewed caste and gender as entangled, but never just easily equated and move beyond the binaries of sameness/differences. 'The feminist turn to Ambedkar thus seek to reclaim and renovate his theoretical articulations to understand how Brahmanical patriarchy fashions sameness, intersection, discreteness and interdependent differences along a gradation of ascending reverence and descending contempt.'¹⁰ She had advocated the necessity of Dr. Ambedkar's ideology to construct Gender historiography in new dimensions. This book had three major sections which had dealt with the various issues. First section had dealt with the caste as endogamy with reference to the two major works first, *caste in India: Their mechanism, genesis and development* and second was *The rise and fall of Hindu women: who was responsible for it?* Written by Dr. Ambedkar. In the second section she had discussed the 'Madness of Manu' referring popular Riddles of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, that is riddle no. 18, *Manus madness or the Brahmanic exploitation of the origin of the mixed castes* and riddle no19, *The change from paternity to maternity: what did Brahmins wish to gain by it?* The riddle of Rama and Krishna. The third section of this book had dealt with the unwept and unsung death of Hindu code Bill referring the views of Dr. Ambedkar, 'I belong to the other caste' on the eve of resigning from the cabinet. She pointed out that 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, 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 laboratory politics can be engaged –both within and outside academy.¹¹ As Shefali Chandra argued that *Against the Madness of Manu* compiles a vast number of Ambedkar's writing on gender and caste. Each of his lengthy expositions is accompanied by original contextual introduction as well as

summaries by professor Rege , leaving the reader with the tools by which to link caste with gender , and to reclaim Ambedkar’s work as a ‘feminist classics’ on Brahmanical patriarchy .¹² This book is one of the most crucial attempt to shed clear lights of feminist readings of Ambedkar and shown us how can new possibilities come up for the positive dialogue between Phule-Ambedkarite feminist and non-dalit feminist . Rege’s final work ‘*Against the Madness of Manu: B.R. Ambedkar’s Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy*’ offered a detailed annotation of Babasaheb’s texts. On completing the book, Rege had stated that she can now die in peace. This was before she had been diagnosed with any illness and appeared to be fine outwardly. Sharmila would end all her emails with Babasaheb’s quote: “*My final words of advice to you are educate, agitate and organize; have faith in yourself. With justice on our side I do not see how we can lose our battle.*”¹³

Dr. Shrmila Rege : Methodolgy of Gender Historiography

As Sarkar argued that Women in Non-Brahman Movement, History of late colonial India has always prioritized Indian nationalism, such that it comes to be assumed that the world of political action and discourse can be comprehended only through the categories of nationalism, imperialism and communalism. The radical historiographies of colonial India, though they emphasized the autonomous role of peasant, labor and other subaltern groups, equated the historiography of colonial India with that of Indian nationalism¹⁴ In the last quarter of twentieth century Non Brahmanical scholarships in historiography had increased widely . Some prominent scholars like Comarade Sharad Patil. Dr. Gail Omvedt, Alyosius came forward and tried to reconstruct Maharashtra Historiography by the Non Brahmanical perspective. The non-Brahmanical re-constructions of historiography of modern India in the works of Omvedt (1976, 1993, 1994), Patil (1982) and Alyosius (1997) have underlined the histories of anti-hierarchical, pro-democratizing collective aspirations of the lower caste masses which are not easily encapsulated within the histories of anti-colonial nationalism. In fact these histories have often faced the penalty of being labeled as collaborative and have therefore being ignored in a historiography which is dominated by narratives of nationalism.¹⁵ Sharmila Rege was also a great combination of Academician scholar and activist. Dr. Uma Chakravarti had focused on Sharmila Rege’s contribution in the preface of her edited book , entitled *Thinking gender , Doing Gender*, ‘ This book is a celebration of the spirit of Sharmila Rege and wide range of interests that she had in the fields of pedagogy, history and cultural practices. In many ways , she represented the interesting turn in feminist scholarship which second generation of feminists brought into women’s studies, because the practice of feminist scholarship was for them as important as the analytical work that the first generation of feminist scholars had brought into thinking about gender.’¹⁶ Sharmila Rege had discussed a lot on the standpoint theory in the Gender history . While developing the methodology of gender history she had emphasized on the various new sources of historiography. Mainly she used the oral history as a prominent source for writing gender history. Oral history became an important plank for editing gender into history and society, as the existing public archives did not allow for a meaningful engagement with gender.¹⁷ ‘No Document No History’ is the major principal of mainstream history. If we take this principal in consideration we will noticed that there are very little sources or no sources in written form are available for the historical investigation of women’s history in general and Gender history in particularly. Thinking particularly about the Maharashtra, women acquired the right of education largely after the independence. There were very few number of women

who were educated, who could read and write therefore there were limitation for the creation of documentary historical resources. Besides that male historian also could not given fare wattage to women’s contribution and aspirations into the mainstream history. In such kind of situations Dr. Sharmila Rege had opened up new directions towards the gender historiography in her work . She had focused on the gender in caste perspective of Indian society, according to her gender and caste are instinctly inerlinckged and therefore we can’t explore them separately . Sharmila Rege had focused on the ignorance of caste in the mainstream feminist discourse of first and second wave of feminism. She had also explored the crucial contribution of Dr. Babsasheb Ambedkar into the Indian women’s upliftment and caste and gender theoretician. She had admitted the truth that the feminist scholarship had ignored the great Gender historian like Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar ‘ currently feminist debate and curricula are almost entirely disengaged from Ambedkar’s writing and politics. In the contrary , Gandhi , Nehru and Lohia a longstanding place in the same discourse ¹⁸ she had tried her best to include the theories and practices of him into the women’s studies . The interrogation of the obvious influence of colonial disciplinary perspectives on caste in feminist studies and the tokenism of the mantra caste, class and gender would call for a programmatic intervention of women’s studies. I suggest that as part of such an intervention , we turn to new sources and methods of interpretation for understanding Dr. Ambedkar in his times and ours, and reclaim some of his writings on Brahmanical patriarchy as a feminist classics. ¹⁹ She had adopted the oral sources as her major tool for writing gender history . Interviews of dalit movement women , folklores , Shahiri , songs of dalit women, booklets were collected by her by great efforts . She had also emphasized on dalit women’s autobiographies as a testimonial to reconstruct the gender history. She said that , I shall argue that assorted sources like musical compositions and booklets that circulated within the space constituted by the Ambedkar calendar events in Maharashtra would reveal that the reclaiming of a feminist Ambedkar as a much longer and richer history outside the academia. ²⁰ She had constructed the gender ideology in Abrahmani that is Phule Ambedkrite perspective . Her most valuable contribution in the field of Women’s Studies would be the ‘Dalit-Feminist’ Standpoint. She had narrated that masculinization of Dalithood and the Savarnisation of womanhood produces the classical exclusion and erasure of Dalit Womanhood. Rege uses Ambedkar’s definition of caste as endogamous class sustained through control over the woman’s sexual and reproductive activities. She explains that one cannot conceive of an adequate sexual politics without taking note of the intrinsic linkage between caste and sexuality.²¹ Her contribution in the debate and discourse of ‘Dalit Feminist Standpoint’ is a example of historical methodology of gender itself. *“Dalit feminist standpoint which emerges from the practices and struggles of Dalit woman, we recognise, may originate in the works of Dalit feminist intellectuals but it cannot flourish if isolated from 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. A transformation from ‘their cause’ to ‘our cause’ is possible for subjectivities can be transformed. By this we do not argue that non-Dalit feminists can ‘speak as’ or ‘for the’ Dalit women but they can ‘reinvent themselves as Dalit feminists’. Such a position, therefore avoids the narrow alley of direct experience based ‘authenticity’ and narrow ‘identity politics’.* ²²

Conclusion :

Sharmila Rege argued about historicising difference with the reference of Vaid and Sangari that , Feminist historiography made radical breakthroughs in teasing out the redefinitions of gender and patriarchies, i e, to say in "pulling out the hidden history swept under the liberal carpet of reforms"²³ Feminist renderings of history have been ever since concerne d with comprehendin g the linkages between reforms and the realignments of patriarchies with hierarchies of caste, class, ethnicity and so on. Vaid and Sangari (1989) make a significant distinction between the "modernising of patriarchal modes of regulating women" and the "democratising of gender relations" both at home and the work place. They underline both the revolutionary potential and inherent contradictions that the democratising movements constituted for peasant and working class women. While these democratising movements are seen as heralding 'class rights for women' as 'against and over' simply familial or caste-related identities; the histories of the nonbrahman democratic movements, ever so crucial to the emancipatory discourse on caste and gender come to be overlooked.²⁴

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