

A Different History of Indian Feminism

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Against the Madness of Manu: B.R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy, Selected and Introduced by Sharmila Rege, Navayana, 2013, New Delhi. 266 pages. Rs. 350/- ISBN No: 9 7881 89 059538

"In Indian universities today, it is not often that we encounter the writings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in the curricula of social sciences and humanities. It seems appalling that students and teachers, like myself, can in most cases sail through postgraduate and research degrees in social sciences, and practice women's studies in the academia without ever having read the speeches or writings of Ambedkar." (p.13)

Sharmila Rege's introduction to *Against the Madness of Manu: BR Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy* opens with pedagogical purpose. Clearly, when academic disciplines get encrusted and incarcerate curricula and learning within the segregations – spatial and intellectual -- of a hegemonic and unjust social order, breaking free necessarily involves the invention of a new intellectual corpus and the redefinition of the form and content of the canons.

An important part of the project Rege undertakes is to foreground the connections between Ambedkar's words and the politics of dalit feminism, which has "sustained a long-term defiance of Brahmanical feminisms and patriarchal ideologies and practices of anticaste politics...[and in so doing has] traced different histories and futures of feminism and anticaste politics in India" (p. 56) and yet has not been adequately understood by non-Dalit feminists and Dalit men.

The book is organized into three sections that present that segment of Ambedkar's writings, which focus on brahmanical patriarchy. The first section looks at his classic position on castes in India; the second section presents his riddles on Manu's madness; and the third focuses on Ambedkar's intervention in the parliamentary debates on the Hindu Code Bill.

The task before us is not just to understand Ambedkar in different terms, but to look at the social sciences and humanities through a lens that breaks down opacities in perspectives and structures -- gender, caste, religion and faith are at the centre of this project, in their intersection. It is with this twin purpose that she sets about mapping and reclaiming Ambedkar's seminal contribution to resisting Manu's madness making an impassioned argument for a radically different intellectual history of feminism on the Indian subcontinent. Quite apart

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from stating that reclamations should be made, Rege shows us, in this work, how we might enrich feminist theory through an Ambedkarite lens.

Sharmila Rege renders visible the ways in which Ambedkar, through his own writing and political work, as well as through the mass cultural movements he continues to inspire, sets out a different grammar to make the workings of the social order intelligible. There are activists, *shahirs* (bards), *gayan parties* and dalit feminist writers, biographers and scholars who make this grammar intelligible to us through song, performance, writing, historiography and the practice of politics. Higher education in the social sciences especially, in her view, urgently needs to reinvent itself. But also as a political practice, feminism in India needs to reinvent itself.

In doing this, Rege draws on the literary and cultural corpus of Ambedkarite calendar events in Maharashtra, on Ambedkar's negotiations between the personal and the political as evident through his writing and the writing of his biographers -- which importantly speaks about the tensions in conjugality and the resolutions thereof especially in Ambedkar's relationship with Ramabai. Although Ambedkar married a second time, thirteen years after Ramabai's death, Savitabai's presence in Ambedkar's intimate life is a source of tension in the political community that Ambedkar built. The comparisons between Ramaai, the Mahar mother of the Ambedkarite movement, and Savitabai, the Brahmin wife who needed lessons in conjugal modesty -- in fact offer a rich opportunity to delve into the recesses of brahmanical patriarchy and the deep tensions in resistance to caste as embodied in the personal and political life of Ambedkar himself (pp. 30-42).

In examining the architecture of the caste system, Ambedkar sees endogamy as embedded in the foundation of the system, and fuelled by "three singular uxorial customs" – sati, enforced widowhood and girl marriage (p.91) – that kept the hierarchy and male control in place through the disposal of surplus women and the accommodation/absorption of surplus men. Rege argues that Ambedkar's discussion on endogamy delineates a significant shift in social relations from exogamy in primitive societies to the superimposition of endogamy on exogamy and the patriarchal strategies to maintain gender parity in marriageable units in this structural contradiction – violent by definition. Exclusionary violence and subjugation of women, for him, were inherent in the very processes that lead to caste formation. "By framing caste within gender differences that determined the value of surplus man and surplus woman," Sharmila observes, "Ambedkar was laying the base for what was, properly speaking, a feminist take on caste." (p.61)

Juxtaposing the position of women in Buddhism to Manu's denial of knowledge and *sanyas* to women, Rege underscores Ambedkar's celebration of Buddha's radicalism in allowing *parivraja* [ordination] to women, and the recognition of all categories of women – married, unmarried, widows, prostitutes -- as "rational beings capable of intellectual communion." (p. 71) In making this comparison, we are reminded that Ambedkar questions the view of history that privileges dynastic conflict without taking note of social antagonisms – he proposes an

alternate periodization of history: Brahmanic India, Buddhist India and Hindu India (p. 68). A feminist reclamation would, in Rege's view, regard Ambedkar's history of revolution and counter-revolution "as one of the proto-feminist approaches to writings on ancient India", and "would lead to a fruitful discussion between Ambedkar's Buddha and contemporary feminist positions on the question of whether Buddhism provides a viable alternative to Brahmanical patriarchy." (p. 75)

The second section which looks at Ambedkar's "Riddles in Hinduism" which when first published in 1987 triggered riots, protest, withdrawal and re-issue, unpacks the riddle of graded violence against women.

What is Manu's madness? In his tendency to malign all those who violate the code of endogamy in the caste order, Manu, in Ambedkar's view, fails to grasp the implication of promiscuity inherent in his emphasis on the "bastard" origin of a range of mixed castes: "The caste of Chandala is said by Manu to be the progeny of illegitimate intercourse between a Shudra male and a Brahman female. Can this be true? It means that Brahman women must have been very lax in their morality...So vast is the Chandala population that even of every Brahman female was a mistress of a Shudra it could not account for the vast number of Chandalas in the country...Why did he say that castes were mixed in origin, when as a matter of fact they were independent in their existence?" (pp. 166-167). What Ambedkar refers to in fact is Manu's perverse historical explanation of the emergence of powerful tribes like the Abhiras, Ambashtas, Andhras, Magadhas and Nishadas as bastard castes (p. 141).

Rege observes that in opening out the differential rules for mating and lineage for men and women of different castes, "Ambedkar...emphasises the design of a grid of differential rules ...as a means of reproducing caste and gender distinctions. These rules operate such that stringent control over sexuality becomes the reserve of the men of privileged castes while simultaneously carving spaces for their enforced cohabitation with women of the subordinated castes" (p. 145) – inevitably dragging some women of the 'untouchable' castes into prostitution through the devadasi system (p. 147). In the Ambedkarite legacy, Janaki, the Murali protagonist in Baburao Bagul's novel *Sud*, resists this mode of human degradation and struggles to "discover the 'self' denied by caste and patriarchy" (p. 149).

Ambedkar's moral critique of Rama and Krishna and the centrality of gender to this critique on the one hand opens out the debate for feminist interpretations of epics (p. 149), and on the other, by "debunk[ing] the sacrament myth of Hindu marriage...underscore[s] that no one's 'private sphere' – not even that of Gods – is free from critique," (p. 152) it lays the foundation of his articulation of the "personal sphere" in his arguments on the Hindu Code Bill: "Above all let each girl who marries stand up to her husband, claim to be her husband's friend and equal, and refuse to be his slave" (cf. Rege, p. 199). Clearly, his strong and reasoned arguments shook the very core of Brahmanical patriarchy even within the Constituent Assembly and Parliament, and unwilling to "make a farce of our Constitution and to build a palace on dung heap" (cf. Rege, p. 201), Ambedkar

resigned as Law Minister. This protest against the suspension of the democratic social contract, asserts Rege, is a landmark in the history of democratic struggles for women's rights against the Brahmanical patriarchy of the state". (p. 201)

"One who says Jai Bhim
Knows the value of Jai Bhim

He knows that Baba's Constitution
Is the real pride of India

...

Who says the nation stands on the rupee note
You must say only that which is true
My Bhima lifted the nation
Just on the nib of a pen."

(Composition documented at Mahad on 25 December 2004, cf. Rege, p. 192)

And Sharmila Rege illuminates for us the stunning ways in which Bhima lifted women onto the pathways to freedom.

Obituary

A non-conformist pace-setter

Sharmila Rege (1964-2013), was a Phule Ambedkarite feminist sociologist known for her pioneering work in sociology, women's studies, cultural studies and translation. Joining the faculty of the Department of Sociology in 1991, she went on to become Director of the UGC sponsored Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre, University of Pune – a centre that under her leadership gained recognition from all quarters as one that has shaped the radical growth of women's studies in the country and abroad. She was part of the UGC Standing Committee on Women's Studies and a member of the editorial advisory committee of the Review of Women's Studies, *Economic and Political Weekly*. Sharmila Rege, a bilingual "non-conformist pace-setter" has written and published widely on Dalit cultural politics, feminism, Ambedkarite philosophy and pedagogical practice in women's studies and sociology, besides being a committed and accomplished translator.