



## Remembering Sharmila Rege

Anagha Tambe  
Department of Women and Gender Studies  
Savitribai Phule Pune University, India  
Email: anaghatambe@gmail.com

Swati Dyahadroy  
Department of Women and Gender Studies  
Savitribai Phule Pune University, India  
Email: swatidroy@gmail.com

Sharmila Rege (1964-2013), a feminist scholar from India is well-known for her seminal work on reimagining knowledges, pedagogies, political struggles, and higher educational practices (and interrelationships amongst these), from a Dalit feminist perspective. Ten years after her passing, we seek to commemorate her contributions and reinvestigate the possibility that her work offers for scholars in these troubling times. While an analysis and review of her writings is crucial at this juncture, this essay is a tribute to Rege's Phule-Ambedkarite feminist pedagogy, and her institutional practices at the Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre (Pune), which proved foundational to her overall work. In this essay, we discuss her teaching-learning practices of the Women's Studies classroom in the state university, that recognizes, analyses and interrogates the complex politics of knowledge, its production, distribution, and consumption. By locating herself at the academic borderlands, Sharmila challenged canonical knowledges and the prevalent hegemonic cultures of teaching and learning, by devising new curricula, classroom practices, and resources. Women's Studies episteme for her, interwove the knowledge practices of both academia and activism. In this essay, we discuss her institutional practices of doing Women's Studies that she developed by confronting internal differences along hierarchical lines, social inequality, and through the building and enabling of collective work. Now, at a time when the university system seems to be in flux wrought through transformations and new tensions, Sharmila's insights and practices are critical for the struggle for radical equality.

*Feminism, Pedagogy, Dalit, Ambedkar, Activism, Women's-Studies*

### Introduction

What does it mean to remember Sharmila Rege ten years after her passing, a well-known and widely read scholar whose work is of critical significance for the humanities and the social sciences in India? These have been challenging times for those in academia, committed to the goals of bringing about radical equality and transformative possibilities. The present changes in the university driven by a neoliberal logic of marketization on the one hand, and that constrains academic freedom on the other, is combined with an unsettling upsurge of regulatory right-wing forces. It is in this context, that we seek to remember Sharmila: a radical optimist and a feminist teacher, scholar, institutional builder, and fellow comrade in a collective democratic struggle. We are writing as Sharmila's students, mentees, colleagues and friends and comrades and our reflections are based on twenty years of working together with her and our team/ collective of teachers, researchers, students and friends at the Women's Studies

Centre at the Savitribai Phule Pune University. Our sense of doing academic, and women's studies in particular is constructed through this collective journey. How we remember Sharmila today is shaped by this journey; and also, by how we have remembered her in the last ten years, with others who knew her. This remembering is, hence, personal, collective, and also institutional all at the same time.



Image 11.1: Sharmila Rege by Rohini Shukla. Image Source at Instagram handle@acadoodles.

One can appreciate Sharmila's work and contributions in terms of an approach that promoted doing women's studies institutionally as a separate discipline, and also within the disciplines seeking to interrogate and reimagine those. Her passion and politics to build women's studies as an (inter)disciplinary and institutional episteme and space was integral to her work. She saw women's studies as a space to confront and counter the contemporary challenges faced by the field of higher education more broadly. We would like to discuss some distinct aspects of Sharmila's work over here: transformative pedagogies which she later defined as Phule-Ambedkarite feminist pedagogies. This pedagogic intention was foundational to her research and writing

that interwove the political with the intellectual. Traveling between these two worlds, she also sought to create the intersection between feminist and Dalit transformative politics. Further the central ethical spirit of Sharmila's institutional practices—of doing women's studies meant building a collective space with social difference (cf. Rege 1998). In this essay, we focus more on her pedagogies and institutional practices that she developed at the Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre (now a department) that has been alluded to, in obituaries following her untimely death in July 2013.

### **Journeying and Intersectional Worldviews**

Sharmila is one of those scholars, whose works and critical approach is primarily linked to them being teachers. Her teaching, politics, and institutional work is inseparable from, and rather constitutive of her research and writings. It is her journey between the worlds of teaching and research with questions that troubled her there, and the feedback that these worlds had for each other, that made her work distinct. Sharmila was anxious and deeply engaged for her everyday classroom lectures, at the same level as she would be, while writing a paper or a seminar presentation. She would become angry if she thought that we were not taking teaching as seriously as a seminar presentation or research paper, or not considering students to be as important as fellow academicians. Rather, her family would often wonder and joke about people who called Sharmila great, or who said that they liked Sharmila as a teacher, given the preparation she would make for her regular classroom lectures. She listened keenly and emphatically to her students, colleagues, comrades, editors, readers, and her academic community, and to everybody around her. And these multi-layered conversations across the worlds of teaching, research, and politics marked Sharmila's own academic and institutional output.

Not only are Sharmila's teaching-learning practices, her Phule-Ambedkarite feminist pedagogies discussed in her own writings, but they are also hailed in other scholarly works that critically analyse the pedagogies of doing women's studies (cf. Chauhan 2015). However, her institutional work needs further analysis. This essay is a preliminary attempt to discuss her teaching, politics, and institutional work in further detail that is inseparable from her writing and ponder on what it offers us at this juncture.<sup>1</sup> Sharmila's writings are path breaking in more than one way: a) interrogating disciplinary histories and reimagining sociology from feminist and Dalit perspectives; b) opening up the everyday and the politics of popular culture to the questions of caste, gender and labour; and significantly, c) unravelling the feminist disregard for intersection of caste and gender to build an integrated Dalit feminist standpoint that explores interdisciplinary epistemological possibilities (cf. Rege 2006).<sup>2</sup> Here, we seek

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<sup>1</sup> An extensive analysis of Rege's reimagined and reworked institutional practices at the KSP Women's Studies Centre (Pune) is part of a larger project that maps the future and development of the women's studies episteme in India. This study named *(Im)Possibilities of Institutionalizing Women's Studies in India* investigates the challenges and possibilities of institutionalization and disciplinization of women's studies in India. We know that our friends and comrades that are part of the collective: researchers, students, and others may think, remember and write about these processes differently. And it is an analysis of these very different standpoints itself, that makes up the larger project.

<sup>2</sup> An anthology of Sharmila's writings is underway, edited by V Geetha and Uma Chakravarty with section introductions by some of Sharmila's colleagues and comrades at the women's studies centre. The

to remember Sharmila as a pedagogue and as an institutional builder, though this is admittedly, also a long-term and collective project.

Sharmila's work is fundamentally located in the public and within the state university framework, situated in the non-metropolitan context. She was conscious of what this location of our Women's Studies Centre implied from the very beginning, as the first non-metropolitan centre in Maharashtra that came after the two centres of Mumbai, housed at the SNTU (Shrimati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Women's University) and the TISS (Tata Institute of Social Sciences). This awareness has shaped our vision as well, as it has, the practice of doing women's studies in Pune. Interestingly, our university (Pune University) is a state university that has an orientation towards, as well as a desire of internationalizing education from earlier on; Pune being considered the 'Oxford of the East'! And it is this location that has also shaped Sharmila's work, and of course her teaching, but also her research work and writing. There is a focus on teaching at the university department, rather than research, where majority of our students have studied in Pune or other adjoining districts, with many of them educated in the regional language: Marathi, even though the medium of instruction at the university remains English.

Many teachers, especially of the social sciences and humanities have been doing 'public sociology' in more than one way, connected with the new social movements of the region and the Marathi public sphere more broadly. There has been a significant presence of liberal modernist, leftist, and also anti-caste politics within and outside the university. There is additionally a strong regional sense to academic life. Yet, we have always also had a presence of international students in the classroom coming from different parts of the world; our larger academic community involving scholars from all over India and the world. It is in this ecology of a state university, where Sharmila located herself consciously and solidly. And we can see how her work was being shaped by this ecology.

### **A Phule-Ambedkarite Feminist Pedagogue**

Sharmila's pedagogic practices are attentive to how the classroom and the curriculum are spaces where power relations and social inequalities play out. Her classroom was her site of research and critical praxis, where she employed different strategies to introduce critical visions and perspectives regarding social inequalities and injustices. Sharmila engaged critically with the sociological tradition of knowledge and the politics of power therein, and strove to have a better understanding of how power structures were transmitted, legitimated and reproduced by different social institutions like higher education. Her teaching, research and her classroom were the sites where she addressed power relations, mainly in terms of the knowledges which are considered worthy of study, and the conceptions of different social structures which housed and perpetuated these power relations. Through her different pedagogic practices in the women's studies classroom, she tried to engage with the interlocking nature of gender,

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volume brings out the many possibilities of analysing Sharmila's writings as well as her pedagogic and institutional politics. Sharmila's writings can also be accessed at <http://sharmilarege.com/>.

caste, and class in the construction of the self, and the structures within which the self was located.

It is moreover important to note how Sharmila as a feminist scholar travelled between the disciplines of sociology and women's studies. She saw herself on the disciplinary margins when introducing feminism in Sociology and understood her location of being a women's studies scholar, teacher, and activist as peripheral, while yet, also enabling when addressing the issues of power within the disciplinary framework where knowledge was grounded but also limited. While reflecting on her own location as a feminist teacher and researcher, Sharmila often underlined, that being on the 'academic borderlands' allowed her to inhabit both academy and activism, be interdisciplinary in her approach, and transgress the boundaries between disciplines, which often caused anxiety for the disciplinary regimes. This created an epistemic space to be located along with those, who were also on the social margins: those from different castes, classes, languages, ethnicities, sexualities, and politics; and a possibility to build alliances with them. As she wrote: "these socially contested borderlands are epistemological borderlands constituting the interface between different claims to knowledge" (Rege 2000: 56).

Sharmila's pedagogic experiments were located in the new times, when the presence of Dalit Bahujan women students was expanding, especially in the social sciences which brought a renewed vitality to academic margins by asking questions and challenging these very boundaries. She was extremely critical about the responses these marginalized students received from mainstream academicians who were mourning the decline in the quality of education which it seemed, 'accidentally' corresponded with the entry of these marginalised students in the academic field. Sharmila was addressing these challenges along with other social scientists who were also reviving self-reflexive traditions within academia. However, for her, being located in the disciplinary space of women's studies while being trained in Sociology, was a more complex challenge. She was making efforts to establish women's studies as an (inter)discipline, and simultaneously answering questions about whether this would be rigorous enough, whether it was scholarly enough, or whether it was limited to just a political position or a doctrine, or then, too theoretical that would make it lose its political edge, or jargonistic and not relatable.

This context provides us with a window to comprehend how she navigated academics, movements, and spaces to address the hegemony of upper-caste, patriarchal ideas. Through her teaching, research, and innovative pedagogic practices, Sharmila challenged the hegemony of all those who exercised hegemonic power, by bringing in alternative resources, and by subverting the existing practices of teaching, and more importantly, by placing students from marginalised groups, at the centre of discourse-building. One encounters Sharmila's engagement with the various theoretical debates on standpoint theory, critical race theory, post modernism, and anti-caste theory on one hand, and counterbalance it against her struggle with democratisation, and her struggle against oppressive structures and unjust systems. Through her rigorous engagement with the academic, and other materials produced by those active in the rights movement, she could introduce new resources into pedagogy which were not just innovative or rich in content, but which also asked more fundamental questions

such as: what is knowledge? Who produces knowledge? And why the knowledges produced by those on the margins are never considered as knowledge? This is a consistent red-line of argument that passes through all her research and teaching, which demarcates her commitment to the politics of knowledge, oriented towards creating a democratic academic space. New entrants in higher education could now challenge existing structures, and those in the hegemonic positions would be concomitantly forced to realise the 'lack' that is created because of their non-recognition of resources and knowledges, that are from the margins. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss some of Sharmila's pedagogic practices in further detail that include her classroom exercises and her interventions in building a new curriculum for women's studies. This will help in understanding how she used the everyday world of teaching to subvert Brahmanical hegemony. This understanding will also help to bring out how she employed innovative practices to place 'disadvantaged' students at the centre and yet, maintained academic rigour while sustaining dialogue with those working at the grassroot level.

### **New Curricula**

In the building of any discipline, the curriculum needs to be expansive, rigorous and updated. We will look at Sharmila's experiments with building curriculum at our Centre and her crucial role in an effort for building guidelines or model curriculum for women's studies at the national level. This process of curriculum building initiated by her, outlines the intellectual premise of women's studies by engaging a wide range and depth of feminist scholarship, as well as an engagement with the concerns of contemporary feminist politics. This exercise was challenging, especially as those registering for the women's studies course were more interested in its focus on the 'experiential' and its engagement with the concrete contemporary cases of gender oppression. Some were apprehensive and uneasy about its rigorous theoretical base, its research methodology, and its epistemological debates.

A further introduction to the forms of inequalities other than gender, including caste, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and region, and its intersection, sometimes made students more anxious. Thus, the main challenge for those engaged in curriculum development like Sharmila, was about how to deal with the diverse ideas that students had, about what they wanted to learn in women's studies, and how they would practice women's studies. This would build a curriculum that was intellectually rigorous and as yet accessible. Sharmila's writings about curriculum and the curriculum that she designed, tried to bring this rigour and relevance of the field, and the perspectives from the marginalised section to the centre. She designed extensive reading lists for the courses she taught and some of the references she listed underlines this fact, of how she was challenging the hegemony of established resources, while emphasizing the politics of knowledge production.

In her much-discussed article *Education as Trutya Ratna: Towards Phule-Ambedkarite Feminist Pedagogical Practice* (2010), Sharmila pointed out how classroom teaching reproduces existing power relations. It is thus important to critically evaluate what we teach and how we teach and how it consolidates the hegemony of mainstream knowledge, and the power of the teacher. Sharmila commented on the power

structures within the classroom that emerged from seemingly routine everyday practices. Thus, she consciously experimented with the diversity of the classroom, and also with the resources used in teaching. This, rather than underlining the 'lack' experienced by students from marginalised backgrounds, analysed the structural roots of this 'lack', and shifted the burden of this 'lack' from the disadvantaged within the system that in turn, privileged a few.

Her effort was aimed at initiating discussion about how structures perpetuated exploitative conditions, and how it was not sufficient to merely acknowledge these privileges or disadvantages, but to also examine how these were produced, and to confront them openly and reflexively (Nash 2019). Her reading lists and lesson plans underlined her engagement with different domains of knowledge and bodies of theory which do not usually speak with each other (Brown 2005). This produced her teaching and pedagogic practices as not only student-centric, but also a practice that challenged existing power structures within and outside the classroom. While addressing this issue of power, Sharmila focused more on questions of language, resources, and classroom dynamics, weaving her pedagogic practices around these issues.

We will discuss three of her pedagogic experiments here: a) a bilingual book b) a bridge course and its manual, and c) the use of unconventional resources such as movement literature, regional materials, and popular audio-visual materials in teaching. Through this, Sharmila attempted to subvert power dynamics in the classroom and build bridges between diverse group of students that enabled them to understand and question their mutual inequalities (cf. Rege 2011b). Sharmila addressed the language question in terms of the social disparities and inequalities that it concealed, and sought to develop elaborate bilingual pedagogies (cf. Rege 2010b). As teachers, if we engage with the social positioning of the student from the marginalised background, it will allow us to understand how different systems of inequalities come together to produce a lack / disadvantage for that student (Collins 2000). And Sharmila attempted to make the exploitative structures visible to both teachers as well as students, so that they are able to analyse relations of power and hierarchies on their own.

In order to address the power implicit within language, and to make the classroom democratic, Sharmila developed a bilingual reader for her course which included a soft copy of reading material in English that was introduced and contextualized in detail in Marathi, to make it accessible through module-wise chapters. Then there were Marathi translations of key English texts that were brought out thematically. Another practice was to bring into public, some of the popular resources and discourses that were in languages other than English and were in Marathi. This included knowledge practices of different languages and different worlds, in terms of political and intellectual representation. Rather than the usual remedial English course that treated the language of teaching and learning as an individual problem for students, Sharmila designed a co-curricular bridge course. This bridge course involved practising diversity in the classroom by focusing and questioning structural differences and the unequal access to resources, capacities, and capital dictated within the modern educational system. She identified gaps between the worlds of undergraduate and postgraduate education, and the gaps between education and employment, designing

a course that would develop critical thinking, reading and writing among students. And instead of putting the burden of learning language and academic skills and capacities on individual students from marginalized groups, her bridge course fractured prevalent assumptions about 'good' English education that would wedge open the ignorance produced through limited knowledge. This course became "..... a collective effort to reinvent ourselves as teachers .....and a political intervention against an increasingly intolerant meritocracy that expresses itself through a rhetoric of choice and freedom without any reference to power and equality" (Rege 2011: 6).

It is further interesting that the bridge manual that was designed for students, started by introducing readers to the epistemological position that challenged scholars who lamented the loss of quality education, and then went on to discuss the different articulations of students about talking back to the system. In a very interesting way, Sharmila referred to the challenges faced by 'privileged' students, their ignorance about what they lacked, and underlined the need of this bridge programme 'even' for them. Her introduction ended with excerpts from different Dalit feminist writings about the language question; she thus drew from the Dalit imagination of language to propose an alternative to the official remedial programme.

The task here, as Sharmila saw it, was to understand the classroom as a site of struggle, and to transform it as a space for learning together for teachers and students. Education according to her was not just about the content, but about developing a critical eye, Phule's 'third eye',<sup>3</sup> and a capacity to dissent to dominant cultural practices that perpetuated exploitative structures. She was very critical about the everyday of the classroom in terms of what we teach, assume about the class, the resources we bring, and most importantly, the positionality of the students. Sharmila would come up with different ideas to make the classroom more democratic. For one of her bridge course sessions, she brought party hats in the class and requested students to actually wear those as 'thinking caps'. While everyone in the class were reluctant, they were curious as well. And so most of them wore these caps to discover the distinction between the thinking, routine, stock responses, rhetorical and binary understanding, and the critical, creative thinking process and what this would mean for doing social sciences. She not only used diverse resources such as audio-visual materials like films, documentaries, images etc. in her class to develop nuanced understanding of the structures, but also encouraged students to bring their own resources to the classroom. What students read, listened to, or watched would in turn enable the teacher to understand their life-worlds and the knowledges with which they engaged, in the world that was outside the classroom.

These methods disrupted the power equation between teachers and students, and subverted their ideas about who was the source of knowledge, and who its recipient. The diverse resources brought by Sharmila into the classroom, raised the confidence of marginalised students, encouraging them to participate and contribute to the classroom discussions, and to talk from their subject locations. Thus, for instance, through Iranian films, classic Bollywood films or documentaries, reading material on ethnic violence, or protests from different countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka,

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<sup>3</sup> Jotiba Phule visualized education as *tritiya ratna* or the third eye that opens up a new way to understand the world by recognizing, challenging, and transforming the relationship between power and knowledge.



Nepal, or Iran that Sharmila brought into the class, she tried to bring a global perspective to deconstructing the assumed binary between local / global. The classroom became a space for both teachers and students for collective learning and the creation of knowledge.

Significantly, according to Sharmila, criticality of thinking and education could not be dichotomized to the concerns of student employability. She therefore also engaged with questions about the employability of students much before the significance of such a question came to be acknowledged and debated upon in the field of higher education. She was among the first few who questioned the assumed divide between critical thinking, and skills that were deemed important for employment. Today, when professionalization and skill-building has become integral to the neoliberal logic of universality, Sharmila's vision of linking critical thinking and working with diversity, developed in the social sciences and humanities translated into building student capacities that would result in their employability in diverse sectors. This was not only unusual but also ingenious. She enabled a dialogue between teachers, academicians, and potential employers through seminars, through networks with diverse organizations that the Centre created, through modular workshops of practitioners that was integrated into teaching, and through an elaborate internship and block placement programme. All these innovations need to be investigated further within the new context, and appreciated anew.

### **A Journey between Pedagogical and Political/ Academia and Activism**

Feminism and women's studies are intellectual-political projects and the dangers and limitations, or the impossibility of merging these have been widely debated (Brown 2005). Sharmila also interrogated the common assumption implicit within women's studies that saw itself as an academic arm of women's movement, and sought to reimagine the relationship between feminist movements, feminist knowledges, and feminist pedagogies. Sharmila's work encountered in her lesser-known initial writings on the communal politics of Sati, Marxist opposition to gay rights, and the gendered nature of communalism in the context of Gujrat carnage to her widely-known later writings on the Dalit feminist standpoint, Dalit women's testimonios, and feminist reclamation of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar brings out this close and complicated relationship between women's studies and feminist politics. Sharmila continued to flag off these difficult conversations within the women's movement, within democratic struggles, as well as in academic-pedagogic debates, and within the spaces afforded by other social movements. These interactions include a wide range of engagements: from study groups, lectures for activists, articles in movement mouthpieces, publications and booklets, to mobilizing a students' group (*Samvaad* or dialogue), and putting together street plays, political skits, poster exhibitions apart from classroom lectures, workshops, and seminars that included activists and practitioners, and the introduction of movement-materials as resources in the classroom.

Though connecting the worlds of academia and activism has been intrinsic to the constitution of women's studies since its inception, such work is often seen either as a failure, or at least as a troublesome phenomenon. Sharmila's work goes much deeper in its efforts to bridge these two distinct and also divided worlds in more productive

ways, in epistemological terms, to integrate their knowledges and practices. She allowed knowledge practices of both the worlds to interrogate and reconstitute each other. Thus, the seemingly disparate genealogies of feminist perspectives to globalization that she identifies and maps in her EPW article in 2003 *More than just Tacking Women onto the 'Macropicture': Feminist Contributions to the Globalization Discourse* fractures the common frames of sociological debates on globalization, instead, drawing more from both the local feminist engagement with anti-globalization movement in that period on the one hand, while introducing and teaching the globalization question to students of women's studies on the other. Her work on the gendered character of communalization that analyses different 'unspectacular' moments of conflict, right from its mobilization to its resolution, significantly builds upon the fact-finding reports of these conflicts that include reports on the Gujrat genocide produced by feminist and democratic organizations. This analysis made by Sharmila sought to link the political knowledge practices that investigated the Gujarat carnage with feminist scholarship that underlined how women were treated as the battlefield of communal violence on one hand, juxtaposed against women's agency within right-wing politics on the other hand, that interact within multi-layered and ambiguous ways (cf. Rege 1996).

Firstly, she prepared the fact-finding report, while drawing from other such reports that questioned the political silence of local women's organizations on communal violence. Secondly, she wrote a book chapter that investigated historical and regional underpinnings of the unusual phenomenon of Gujarat pogrom to explicate gendered and sexual nature of communal violence (cf. Rege 2003b). Thirdly, she wrote a series of articles in a movement magazine *Shramikanche Aasud* outlining the feminist scholarship on communal violence that goes beyond seeing women in the binary of victimhood and agency.<sup>4</sup> Another instance marking her enriching travel between academic and political worlds is a series of her articles contained in another movement magazine called *Satyashodhak Sanghatak* that introduces the position of black feminism to *Satyashodhak* activists, and that enables rich dialogue between anti-race and anti-caste knowledges about gender and feminism (cf. Rege 2013b, first published during 2003- 2005). This further led Sharmila to map the histories of *Satyashodhak* and Ambedkarite feminisms in her later works (cf. Rege 2006). But more significantly, this engagement went into designing a course in women's studies teaching, *Feminisms: Beyond Local and Global* that explored the development of feminisms across the world in the relational and comparative mode, that situated but did not limit feminism to its location of origin. Apart from this, Sharmila produced many different teaching and learning resources on this theme. There is need for a more extensive analysis and unpacking of Sharmila's different works and academic projects to explore the productive though dialectical relationship between academia and activism.

### **Towards Feminist Institutional Practice**

What does feminist institutional practice look like? Interrogating the gendered nature of institutions, feminists have identified alternative values, structures and practices to redefine their practices, while also articulating their dilemma about the effectiveness

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<sup>4</sup> These articles are not available at present, since this was a short-lived magazine (personal communication: Anagha Tambe and Swati Dyahadroy).

of these practices. Some of the major ideas that have come to be debated in the context of movements and organizations, and then governmental and non-governmental organizations working with feminist goals are the following: instituting non-hierarchical collectivist structures that moderate internal dynamics, instituting participative democratic functioning, the inclusion of different people, fostering democratic and affective bonds that empower and transform participants, and attention provided to the embodied worker and their reproductive life and so on (Acker 1995). The institutionalization of women's studies in academia has similarly been viewed with suspicion.

Drawing from these debates, Sharmila sought to identify sustainable and ethical ways of being in the workplace, that focused more on the politics of experience and empathy to recreate a new collective imaginary of academia. Rather than being sceptical about the process of institutionalization, Sharmila consciously engaged in the politics of working collectively with a 'diverse' team, with a clear desire to reproduce the new imagination of academia and doing women's studies, rather than confining it to specific time and place, as a 'magic time' or an 'island of excellence'. Sharmila herself talked about these interventions in some of her later works (cf. Rege 2010, 2011). An elaborate documentation of this process, with a historical awareness of the practices of doing women's studies, and a radical openness to critique and change is underway at present, to take forward this struggle, albeit with new roadblocks that have resulted in new directions.

For Sharmila, ethical ways of doing women's studies while being in academics in general was crucial; not in a narrow sense but in terms of making a linkage between the political and the epistemological. For her, how we work was intrinsically related to how we think, write, and teach. Academics for her could not be 'mere work', but it was life; one never stopped being an academician in one's life, thus making ideas about 'work-life balance' irrelevant. 'Personal is political' meant reflecting and analysing on one's everyday, rather than making lifestyle into one's politics. Yet, to be an ethical teacher in a public university also meant being constantly accountable for the public funds one received, as part of a salary or as part of a departmental budget. Amongst a range of feminist ethical ways of institutional practice, working as a collective and with a consciousness of difference was central to Sharmila's work.

When we started working as a larger team of research scholars, research assistants who joined under the UGC supported women's studies centres under its 11th plan, we also worked with governmental and non-governmental research funds. It was thus critical that we ensured a democratic and non-hierarchical work culture, and a reflexive commitment and responsibility that was associated with our organizational roles. Not only did this extend to the more-commonly accepted ethical practices that included transparency, sharing, participatory decision-making, and academic freedom, but the focus continued to be on the collective movement forward within a larger intellectual-political journey of doing women's studies. Study circles, for instance that were organized around the reading and discussing of the key feminist works by Angela Davis or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, were one such tool in the forward journey as we sought to prepare ourselves to read within diverse teams, with many of us not having 'English as our First Language' of education. Sharmila brought in a model of teaching

assistance that was a space to create new connections and support networks for students and teachers that would train new scholars into teaching, specifically the new interdisciplinary field of women's studies. Creation of reading files or dossiers, signposts or teaching outlines, teaching reports made by teachers and teaching assistants were some of the other tools that were useful for working together and developing the teaching capacities of the team. These transparent and reflexive team appraisals opened up possibilities for revision.

But most challenging out of all this was working with 'difference' that entailed bringing our different subjectivities to one's academic space. As Sharmila discusses in her work on Phule Ambedkarite feminist pedagogies, our lived experiences located in our social lives were central to this intellectual-political project. The politics of difference was sought to be addressed by disentangling the complex intersection of our differences in terms of gender, caste, class, language, region, and spatiality. And this politics was mapped onto diverse spaces, from the classroom between teachers and students, and among the students from diverse backgrounds, and our workspaces within teams organized through a division of labour and affective ties among us. One of the significant 'products' of this churning was a booklet, 'research room diaries' where our researchers reflected on their relationship with the occasion of 'teacher's day'.

The anti-caste critique of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan as the symbol of the ideal teacher has led to the countercultural commemoration of Jotiba Phule's death anniversary as teacher's day in Maharashtra. Sharmila would persistently share this politics with everyone who wished her on the mainstream teacher's day. The discussion in our research room over what teacher meant to each one of them in that diverse team, over their diverse educational pathways and life worlds led to the creation of this document of 'research room diary' where everyone reflected on their experience and politics of teacher's day. Another such space that continued to be troubling was the 'group work' in a diverse team. Reading and reflecting, discussing the politics of difference was one thing; but working together with a diverse team also meant many disruptions. Students could discuss the politics of seating arrangements and of comfort, of affinities and friendships that they made along the way; but working in a group where members were pre-selected by teachers according to a diversity criterion for grading an assignment was difficult to say the least. Similarly, for the research team, working in a diverse team with time-lines and goals was more difficult than reading and discussing difference. It was the recognition and confrontation of hurt guilt, anger, and a sense of betrayal that enabled us to build the politics of solidarity that has been argued by bell hooks (1994). Building upon these significant experiences, we are now trying to unpack the process of working with difference in which students, researchers and teachers have participated as a collective.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See research report (Anagha Tambe & Swati Dyahadroy) "Breaking through the Inter-Generational Cycle of Educational Inequalities: First Generation Learners, Stigmatized Occupational Groups and Sustainable Futures": <https://tesfindia.iihs.co.in/breaking-through-the-intergenerational-cycle-of-educational-inequalities-first-generation-learners-stigmatized-occupational-groups-and-sustainable-futures/>. This is a project supported by Transforming Education for Sustainable Futures (TESF) India and the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS).

## Conclusion

How can we work with Phule Ambedkarite feminist pedagogies and institutional practices in present times, when the idea of university is changing so drastically to become a space of either vulgar application, or a ‘threat to the nation’? How do we relocate individual struggles in the classrooms, and think of critical pedagogies as a collective endeavour that includes diverse teachers, students, educationists, and activists, who are all committed to equality? How do we challenge the misconstrued opposition between critical feminist pedagogies and the institutionalization of these feminist practices; and explore democratic and collective possibilities that do not produce suspicion, but can work despite of the constraints of neoliberal university life and its modes that are claimed to produce efficiency and austerity? How do we seek to disrupt the boundaries of classrooms to rethink the politics of knowledge that bring in diverse knowledge practices—technological, digital, art-based, and creative, networked and collaborative for an embodied learning process? And how do we learn from the alternative modes of radical studying, not just education, but studying that takes place in unions and in speak-out groups, and in social protests more generally?

And who are these ‘we’? Today, not only students and researchers, but also teachers coming from different socially marginalized groups are making their way into academia, unsettling the dynamics of the university and the classroom. The new marginalities, plural, intersecting and conflicting, are being mobilized within academia, as questions of gender and sexual ambiguity, mental and physical disabilities, a complex interplay of caste, religion and ethnicity have come to be foregrounded. The material uncertainties of the time have exacerbated this challenge, as the diverse social profile of academia intersects with neoliberal individualizing mechanisms.

In such a context defined by such multi-layered power dynamics, our times force us to think about not just collaboration but contention, confrontation, and the risk within the practice of critical pedagogy and collective practices. Sharmila’s reimagination of critical pedagogies and institutional practices that focused on collectivizing as well as ‘institutionalizing’, into which contestation, debate and dialogue over the politics of difference are interwoven, constitutes a critical resource at this juncture. When social science departments are becoming more diverse in terms of students and teachers, the individual pursuit of critical pedagogies may become not just limiting but at best confusing, and at worst condescending towards Dalit Bahujan Adivasi students and teachers, making them illegible. Making it a collective project/ partnership as Sharmila did, may be a difficult but also rewarding struggle. The radical pedagogies we strive for is a public issue and not a personal one that we struggle alone with in our individual classrooms. We need to make it consciously and clearly, as a part of the broader struggle, and a collective action for social justice.

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