

or edited by P. Sainath, Partha Chatterjee, and Ravi Dayal are evidence of why India loves composite culture, secularism, democracy and value of Justice. India's freedom movement is still a live reality which makes people 'movement persons'.

The book should be read by academia, politicians and by those who are committed to values of India's Constitution. P. Sainath deserves appreciation of high order. The book should be translated in all languages so that people's social science could be used academically for making India an egalitarian society with 'fragrance of freedom'.

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Memory Crosswalk

Gail Omvedt: Human Rights Activist

(August 2, 1941 – August 25, 2021)

B. K. Nagla

Dr Gail Omvedt is an American-born Indian scholar, sociologist and human rights activist. Gail was a rare phenomenon in Indian academia and activism. She was an observer of the Indian social movements, participant-academic and activist who has been involved in Dalit and anti-caste movements, environmental, farmers and women's movements. She has done invaluable research, documentation and academic work that no Indian academic can match.

Background

Gail Marie Omvedt was born on August 2, 1941, into a Scandinavian immigrant family in Minneapolis, Minnesota, US and died after a prolonged illness in Kasegaon near Pune on August 25, 2021, at the age of 80. Her father, Jack, worked for years as a lawyer for Native Americans in Minnesota. Her mother, Dorothy, was a homemaker. Gail herself came from a legacy of Leftist and social justice change-makers. Her grandfather was August Omtvedt. From the 1910s to the 1950s, he was involved in local government and also served many years as a State Senator in the Minnesota state legislatures. This was a time of socialist and farmer-labour politics in the state, striking examples of successful third-party movement formations in the US. August was known as a "champion of the little people," with a "burning ambition to make his community what he hoped it could be." This history and the progressive upbringing by her parents inculcated in Gail a strong ambition to contribute to the betterment of society from the bottom up.

After graduating from Carleton College in Minnesota, Ms Omvedt received a Fulbright scholarship in 1963 to study rural communities in India. She went on to the University of California, Berkeley, where she was active in political protests and earned a master's degree and then a PhD in sociology in 1973. She did Ph. D on *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India, 1873-1930*. When she came to India for the first time in 1963~64, she was an English tutor on a Fulbright Fellowship. Omvedt again came to India for further research in the 1970s and settled in India for further studies. During her research into socio-cultural movements here, she met freedom-fighter and social activist Indumati Patankar and later married her son, Bharat Patankar. Therefore, she became an Indian citizen after marrying Bharat Patankar and started living with her husband and his extended family in 1978 at Kasegaon village in southern Maharashtra. She was granted Indian citizenship in 1983 and continued to stay in Kasegaon in the Satara district to work with her husband. Gail Omvedt co-founded Shramik Mukti Dal with her husband and activist Bharat Patankar. She has a daughter Prachi Patankar, a communist activist, writer and educator. In addition to her daughter, Omvedt is survived by her husband and granddaughter.

Gail Omvedt

Writer, Research, and Activist: In her own words, Omvedt writes:

"I was born in Minneapolis, went to Carleton College, and came out to Berkeley only after my first year in India, in 1963-64, returning to India in 1970-71 to do my Ph. D. dissertation and then to finally 'settle' there in 1978. So, I have taken something of the 'great years' of the 60s from Berkeley to India and vice versa! When trying to combine living in India and teaching in San Diego didn't work, I quit and went to India. I had married into a middle caste ('Bahujan') 'rich peasant' farming family in western India and have 'settled' in the large 'village' of Kasegaon (my daughter calls it a 'town' in her poems but by Indian definition, it's a village) in

southern Maharashtra, with Bharat and other members of an Indian joint family. I've been an Indian citizen since 1983.

The social movements I've been involved with included the Dalit and anti-caste movements, environmental movements, and farmers' and women's movements, but at present, I'm most active in the anti-caste movement. To tell the truth, I am a kind of 'mother figure' (along with one other American, Eleanor Zelliot) to many Dalits. One way of putting the problems people of my category has been expressed by one Indian friend "I don't have an address." I've had a variety of occupations, which might be described as 'upscale unorganized sector jobs. Most recent is a three-year position as Senior Fellow at Teen Murti in Delhi (a prestigious place and it has the advantage that I don't have to be there very much of the time but with no computer facilities).

*My most important books include, most recently a wild book that falls in between 'activist journalism' and 'expert scholarship', *Buddhism in India; Challenge to Brahmanism and Caste*; I'm also getting into translation from Marathi *Growing Up Untouchable: A Dalit Autobiography*, you can use it for all kinds of introductory courses!"*

Source: University of California, Berkeley,
<https://sociology.berkeley.edu/gail-omvedt-1>

Theoretical and Methodological Approach

Gail Omvedt was a product of the radical turn in student and youth politics in the USA in the 1970s. The Black civil rights movement for equal rights and treatment, the anti-Vietnam and peace movement and radical feminist assertions in fact transformed the US campuses including the elite ones like the University of California into sites of anti-racist, feminist and anti-imperialist politics and intellectual challenge. Omvedt was a part of this upsurge of youth radicalism.

With this background, Gail Omvedt came to India to study the anti-caste movement in 19th-century Maharashtra. Her engagement with

the anti-caste discourse and practice in a significant sense was an extension of this critical questioning in the metropolis. She could be seen attempting to bring the insights from the critique of race onto the caste question and thereby giving the latter historical depth and social expanse within Indian specificity. Thus, two strategic positions in Omvedt's life and work are unique and important and made a significant difference to her understanding of Indian society in general and the caste question in particular:

Omvedt represented an interesting radical intellectual-ideological-cultural shift in terms of internal challenge to the US-led international hegemonic power politics. She brought into her work and through her work — both *discursive and practical* — in India theoretical insights and perspectives from the *intellectual and political positions* that are embedded in and brought forth by the anti-imperialist, anti-racial and feminist positions in the US. Her thinking truly represented the *dialectical relationship/ intersection between the global, national and local and the shifts therein*.

This was not a mere individual effort but could be seen to be part of a collective network of radical scholars in the US with an intellectual interest in Asia who later formed themselves into a solidarity around the journal *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* which Gail Omvedt was an active member of.

Theoretical Analysis of Caste:

Omvedt is one of the key theorists of the centrality of caste in Indian society both historically and in its transformative trajectory. Her theoretical analysis of caste could be seen evolving steadily since her early work on Phule and Satyashodak movement (1976). She has displayed greater sensitivity to the limitations in her initial work in terms of the materialist theory of caste.

Her openness to criticism comes out clearly in her response to B T Ranadive's (1978) critical book review. Accepting the validity of Ranadive's critique of her work as "dominated by anti-Marxist concepts like plural society and elite competition" under the influence of the mainstream sociology then practised in the US academia she

admits that "a revolt against caste is never simply a "cultural revolt", can never be an attack purely at the cultural level, and requires the transformation of the relations of production. Thus, the Satyashodhak movement and similar movements were essentially democratic anti-feudal movements, in their radical form crucially linked to peasant agrarian revolution and requiring full destruction of imperialist domination" (Omvedt: 1978: 70.) Her effort to develop a theory of caste that transcends its treatment as a cultural/ superstructural issue distant from the base is evident in her later work *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (1994) where she tried to work out a fuller exposition of the Marxist materialist theory of caste as the basis of Indian social formation (Omvedt, 1994).

Subaltern Perspective:

Gail Omvedt's work on Phule and Ambedkar and their role as organic intellectuals educating, influencing, and organizing the subaltern Dalit and Bahujan masses in colonial India and as a critical stream within the anti-colonial politics and parallel/ alternative to official nationalism could have been a critical pointer to a proper understanding of the elite-subaltern, insider-outsider and external-internal dialectic. Since the *Subaltern Studies* project aims at constructing the narrative of Indian nationalism 'from below', it would have been imperative on such a task to address and explore the foundational issues of caste as a fundamental obstruction in the process of nation-making in India.

Seeking Begumpura (2008), one of the latest works by the American-born sociologist and longtime Indian citizen Gail Omvedt marks a watershed in the battle to uncover the hearts and minds of the oppressed and powerless – the 'subalterns' of the Subcontinent's history. Over the past quarter-century, two scholarly traditions have been torchbearers in this task. The first is the Subaltern Studies Group, which includes historians inspired by the Vienna-based historian Ranajit Guha; the second are the 'critical traditionalists', best known through the ideas of the 'political psychologist' Ashis Nandy.

Caste, meanwhile, has been largely absent from both schools of thought. In 1993, Gail Omvedt criticized the Subaltern Studies Group for largely neglecting the issue, posing the question to them: Would B R Ambedkar be considered a 'subaltern'? On the other side, Meera Nanda, a historian of science, more recently challenged the critical traditionalists by emphasizing a Dalit view of modernity that does not valorize Indic 'tradition' in ways that an easy postmodernism of privileged classes, castes and gender would attempt to do. Meanwhile, the response from both of these groups to such caste-based criticism has been either dismissive (see Nandy's latest book, *Time Treks*) or chillingly silent.

Further, it is necessary to note that Omvedt could be seen complicating the process of articulation of caste by exploring its inter-sectionalise with class, religion, state, policy, gender and nationality questions. Her interventions in the debates on agrarian questions, women's struggles, anti-Mandal, and regional struggles like the Assam movement have sought to capture the dynamic interrelationship between different aspects of social processes and present an integrated view of the society in motion.

Gail Omvedt has been honoured with several awards

- Honorary Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, 1964–65
- Fulbright Fellowship as Tutor in English in India, 1963-1964
- University of California Graduate Fellowships, 1964–65, 1965–66
- American Institute of Indian Studies, Junior Fellowship for PhD research in India on "The Non Brahman Movement in Maharashtra," January–December 1971
- American Association of University Women, Fellowship for research on "Women's Movement in India," January–December 1975
- Savitribai Phule Puraskar, Padmashri Kavivarya Narayan Surve Sarvajanic Vacanalay, Nashik, 2002

- Dr. Ambedkar Chetna Award, Manavwadi Rachna Manch Punjab, August 2003
- 'Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anticaste Intellectuals' (Navayana 2008)
- ABP Majha Sanman Purskar, 2012
- Matoshree Bhimabai Ambedkar Award (2012)
- Vitthal Ramji Shinde Award, April 2015
- Lifetime Achievement Award from the Indian Sociological Society, 2018.

By Prachi Patankar:

My parents, Gail Omvedt & Bharat Patankar—both firebrand anti-caste activists and public intellectuals—met in the late 1970s when my mom, a Berkeley graduate, was studying and participating in the anti-caste movement in India. My dad had left his career as a medical doctor to become a full-time activist, and then a leader in the textile workers strike in Mumbai. They fell in love, discovering the unity of their ideals and their dreams of changing the world, and decided to get married. My dad remembers their first date was by the sea in Mumbai. "Our whole first meeting had a blue aura to it—the ocean, her sea-blue eyes, the clear blue skies, and my deep dark blue skin!"

My freedom-fighter grandmother, an activist in her own right, a single mother who had raised my father in the village since he was two when my grandfather was killed, was apprehensive about the match. But the two women soon developed a bond like no other.

Gail's contribution to academic and intellectual literature on the Dalit-Bahujan anti-caste movement has been immense. As a founder of the Shramik Mukti Dal, a mass-based movement organization that brings together the ideology of Marx, Phule, and Ambedkar, Bharat's intellectual and activist contribution to the water and land rights movements is unparalleled. They live in

rural Maharashtra in Kasegaon and continue their extensive work.

Their love for each other has only deepened with the passage of time, and through the movements they have led. They are an inspiration to me and generations of Indian youth who dream of a more just and equitable India.

I consider myself an extremely lucky person to have been raised by three fierce, feminist fighters — Gail Omvedt, Bharat Patankar and my grandmother Indutai Patankar. From a very young age, the living traditions of Tukaram, Savitribhai Phule, B.R. Ambedkar along with Rosa Luxemburg, Emma Goldman, and Karl Marx was our everyday culture.

Source: India Love Project, 25 March 2021

Activism

Omvedt was a lifelong activist who chose to live among those she worked with and wrote about in Maharashtra, the second most populated state in India. She spoke flawless Marathi, the local language, and spent considerable time doing work in poor communities fighting caste oppression in rural regions. In the years before her death, she was working as a consulting sociologist on gender, environment and rural development, for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Oxfam Novib (NOVIB) and other institutions. She was a consultant for UN agencies and NGOs, served as a Dr Ambedkar Chair Professor at NISWASS in Orissa, a professor of sociology at the University of Pune, an Asian Guest Professor at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Copenhagen and as a Senior Fellow at the Nehru Memorial Museum, New Delhi and research director of the Krantivir Babuji Patankar Sanstha. She was a Visiting Professor and Coordinator, at the School of Social Justice, University of Pune and a Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. Gail Omvedt was a former Chair Professor for the Dr B.R. Ambedkar Chair of Social Change and Development at IGNOU.

“Gail did not sit in an ivory tower. She spent time learning from the lives and experiences of the people she was writing about.”

When Omvedt first visited India on a Fulbright scholarship in 1963, she was already organizing student protests against the Vietnam War and had participated in the burgeoning civil rights movement in the United States. During her college days in the 1960s, Gail found herself swept up in the mass-based anti-war and Black civil rights movements. She threw herself into the struggle, participating in militant protests as a feminist, anti-racist and anti-imperialist in California. Prachi, her daughter says: “For my mom, women’s liberation and Black liberation were connected and were also universal concerns. She knew that militarism and racism were at the core of what structured the United States” (Prachi: Wire). Academic and cultural interest in India was not particularly uncommon in that era, with the intersecting hippie trail that ran through the country and parts of neighbouring Nepal, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.’s India visit in 1959 and his subsequent interest in its nonviolent struggle for independence against the British, and the heavily publicized trip by the Beatles a few years later.

But Omvedt wasn’t simply interested in the notion of a flagrantly spiritual, tidily sanitized, and mostly Hindu India. She studied at Carleton College, Minnesota, under the tutelage of Eleanor Zelliott, who was among the earliest American academics to study the enforced divisions in Indian society from the marginalized perspective. She wanted to learn about something that was pointedly and deliberately kept under wraps at that time: caste.

When Omvedt—and Zelliott before her—arrived on the scene, Indian sociology and academia were overrun by nationalist academics who mostly ignored caste and framed an “orientalist, Hindu idea of India as if that was the actual history of India,” in the words of acclaimed professor Surinder S. Jodhka in a recent online tribute to Omvedt.

Although Omvedt’s early work focused on the ongoing women’s rights movement in India, it was mostly her work on Jyotirao

“Jyotiba” Phule, a caste revolutionary from the 1800s who along with his wife, Savitribai, established the first formal school for girls in India, and B.R. Ambedkar, the Dalit-born founding father of India’s modern anti-caste movement and the architect of the country’s constitution, that gained her notoriety.

Her work brought into sharp focus the intersections of caste hierarchy, class, gender, land ownership and accessibility, and the environment all at the same time—a remarkable achievement for an academic in the late 1970s and 1980s, when the concept of intersectionality was still on the distant margins of mainstream Western academia.

She worked with social movements in India, including the Dalit and anti-caste movements, environmental movements, farmers’ movements and especially with rural women. She was active in Shramik Mukti dal, Stri Mukti Sangarsh Chalval which works on issues of abandoned women in Sangli and Satara districts of southern Maharashtra, and the Shetkari Mahila Aghadi, which works on issues of women’s land rights and political power. She on occasion supported big-dam projects and GMO crops (Omvedt, 2010 Part 1 &2).

Gail Omvedt was an Ambedkarite scholar who contributed immensely to the anti-caste movement. She was critical of the religious scriptures of Hinduism (or what she specifically regarded as “Brahminism”) for what she argued is their promotion of a caste-based society.

In addition to her criticism of their purported advocacy for the caste system, Omvedt also dismissed the Hindu tradition of venerating the Vedas as holy. In a 2000 open letter published in *The Hindu* addressed to then-BJP President Bangaru Laxman, she gave her perspective on the Rigveda:

As for the Vedas, they are impressive books, especially the Rig Veda. But to take them as something holy? Read them for yourself! Most of the hymns are for success in war, cattle-stealing, lovemaking and the like. They celebrate conquest; the hymns about Indra and Vrtra sound suspicious as if the Aryans were responsible for smashing dams built by the Indus Valley people; though archaeologists tell us there is no evidence for direct destruction by “Aryan invasion”, the Rig Veda

gives evidence of enmity between the Aryans and those they called dasyus, panis and the like (Omvedt, 2000).

Omvedt posits that Hindutva groups foster an ethnic definition of Hinduism based on geography, ancestry and heritage in order to create solidarity amongst various castes, despite the prevalence of caste-based discrimination. Omvedt endorsed the stand taken by Dalit activists at the 2001 World Conference Against Racism that caste discrimination is similar to racism in regarding discriminated groups as “biologically inferior and socially dangerous (Omvedt, 2003).

She called the United States a “racist country” and has advocated for affirmative action; however, she compared American positive-discrimination policies favourably to those of India, stating:

It is a sad commentary on the state of Indian industrialists’ social consciousness that such discussions have begun in an organized way in the U.S. before they have been thought of in India itself (Omvedt, 2011).

and, with respect to perceptions of “group performance”, in the United States and India, Omvedt wrote:

Whereas the U.S. debate assumes an overall equal distribution of capacity among social groups, in India the assumption seems to be that the unequal showing of different caste groups on examinations, in education, etc. is a result of actual different capacities.

My Mother, Gail Omvedt, ‘Was a Romantic and Humanist’, says Prachi, her daughter Besides Indian scholar, sociologist and human rights activist, Gail Omvedt is my cherished mother. Pyaasa was one of her favourite films. When I was a kid, she used to play “Jaane Wo Kaise... जाने वो कैसे लोग थे जिनके, प्यार को प्यार मिला (Wonder who those people were, who found love in response to love)” ; “किसको फुरसत है जो थामे, दीवानों का हाथ (Who has the time, to hold the hands of crazed lovers)” and “बिछड़ गया हर साथी देकर, पल दो पल का साथ (I have lost every companion, after spending some moments together)” on her

guitar, singing in her broken Hindi. This was in the rotation of songs she played, along with those of Joni Mitchell, as well as her contemporary and fellow Minnesotan, Bob Dylan:

“How many years can some people exist, before they’re allowed to be free? The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind.”

She loved militant and spiritual poetry and music – because it engaged with both the questions and challenges of the present time, but also brought forward eternal questions. Questions about rising up against exploitation and systemic oppression, with love and with dreams of a liberatory future. To the wider public, she was a leading scholar and activist in linking anti-caste and feminist commitments, towards a better world for all human beings.

My brilliant mother, Gail Omvedt, was a militant lover, a dreamer, and a romantic.

She was romantic about the militancy of youth resistance to the status quo. Romantic about women rising up to break patriarchal chains. Romantic about masses rising up against tyranny and oppression. Romantic about the rebellion of inter-caste lovers. Romantic about the militant spirituality of anti-caste poets.

She dreamt about creating a better world here and now, what the great bhakti poet Ravidas had conceived as Begumpura, a land without sorrow. For my mom, this should not be just some imaginary utopia, far beyond reach – but a real Begumpura, borne out of today’s world. With these dreams, she forever practiced hope as an eternal discipline. (Prachi: Wire)

Works:

Omvedt was a committed, courageous and prolific writer who brought to the fore the Phule-Ambedkar legacy in the context of rising social movements in the post-Emergency period. Her close association with grassroots activities of rural women, farmers, forest dwellers and

women-headed households and her involvement in the women’s rights movement in the late 1970s were captured in her book, *We Shall Smash this Prison*. She authored books on Dalit politics, women’s struggles and the anti-caste movement.

Fluent in English, Hindi, and Marathi, Omvedt’s whiteness almost paled next to her anti-caste crusade for justice as many “untouchable” Dalits, often humiliated and discriminated by our fellow brown-skinned “upper-caste” Indians, can attest—myself included”. Since launching her canonical theory on anti-caste movements in India in the 1960s, it seems the world has finally caught up with the ideas Omvedt has been advocating for decades. As Hindu fundamentalist forces threaten to overtake the civil discourse not just in India but also here in the United States, attempting to intimidate Dalit and radical scholars into silence, Omvedt’s work is more relevant than ever and deserves the global recognition long denied to her (Dutt:2019).

Omvedt's PhD dissertation was on *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India, 1873-1930* (reprint of 1976 book) (New Delhi, Manohar, 2011). Besides undertaking many research projects, she was a consultant for FAO, UNDP and NOVIB. For decades, while based at her home in Kasegaon, a village in rural Maharashtra, she collected and translated the texts and work of figures in the anti-caste movement and documented the lives of those around her. Her academic writing includes numerous books and articles on class, caste and gender issues, especially on most notably:

- *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Maharashtra* (Scientific Socialist Education Trust, 1966)
- "We Shall Smash This Prison! Indian Women in Struggle" (Zed Books, 1980)
- "Violence Against Women: New Movements and New Theories in India" (Kali for Women, 1991)

- *Reinventing Revolution: New Social Movements in India* (M.E. Sharpe, 1993)
- *Gender and Technology: Emerging Asian Visions* (1994)
- *Dalits And the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and The Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (Sage India, 1994)
- *Dalit Visions: The Anti-caste Movement and Indian Cultural Identity* (Orient Longman, 1995)
- *Growing Up Untouchable: A Dalit Autobiography* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000)
- *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste* (Sage India, 2003)
- "Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India " (Penguin, 2005)
- *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anti-caste Intellectuals* (New Delhi, Navayana, 2008)
- "Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond" (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011)
- *Songs of Tukoba with Bharat Patankar she has published (translations)* (Manohar, 2012)
- Social Justice Philanthropy: Approaches and Strategies of Funding Organizations
- Jotirao Phule and the Ideology of Social Revolution in India [Omvedt, Gail (11 September 1971). "Jotirao Phule and the Ideology of Social Revolution in India". *Economic and Political Weekly*.]

Brief about the books written by Omvedt

Born in the USA, Omvedt came to India in the early 1970s to research on Mahatma Jotibha Phule-led Nineteenth century Satyashodhak movement in Maharastra which resulted in a Ph. D. thesis submitted to the University of California, Berkeley and later published as a book

entitled Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India.

Omvedt's subsequent work has been a continuation and an extension of her interest in the caste question as the historical specificity of Indian society and its centrality expounded through its interconnections with other dimensions of social reality. Her scholarly work began with Phule as a central figure in the Nineteenth-century anti-caste tradition the scope of which was to be expanded in her later writings on Ambedkar's thought then back to the history of Buddhism and Bhakti movement seen as a continuous advancement of critical thought and praxis challenging caste system and contesting Brahminism that is seen as the philosophical and ideological foundation of caste. Her work on the Dalit, Bahujan, women's, agrarian, and nationality movements add to the complexity of issues that preoccupied her scholarly attention not merely as intellectual interests but substantially as central political questions (Srinivasulu:2021).

Omvedt started her work as an activist-academic with rural women in Stri Mukti Sangharsh Calval and with the women's front of the Shetkari Sanghatana in Maharashtra. She researched the issues of caste, class and gender and gave insight into the Ambedkarite and non-Brahmin movements. Her initial works were on women's movements in the 1970s: *We shall smash this prison: Indian women in Struggle*; Violence against women: new movements and new theories in India and Reinventing Revolution; New social movements and the socialist tradition in India.

After her initial work on the women's movement, she produced her first classic in 1976: *Cultural Revolt in colonial society: The non-Brahmin Movement in Western India*. This is one of the earliest analyses of the anti-caste movement in India by an academic with an insight into the contributions of Jyotirao Phule, Shahu Maharaj and Satyashodhak Samaj. It was rare to see a researcher going through the primary records to give us a blow-by-blow account from 1818 to 1930.

According to Gail, the non-Brahmin movement in western India faded away by the 1930s because the majority of the activists were part of the anti-caste, non-Brahmin movement and joined Congress. But she argued that this non-Brahmin assertion left a strong heritage but failed to link with nationalism and often admitted the dominance of caste in Indian society. The anti-caste sentiment now has a revival after many years in the form of the caste census demand.

Gail's second classic contribution to our knowledge of how India evolved in a democratic process is *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit movement in Colonial India* (1994) which is about the emergence of Dalit movement from 1900 to 1930, which is a pre-Ambedkarite phase in Nagpur, Hyderabad, Andhra, Mysore and in the Bombay presidency. Then she researched the Dalit assertion and the democratization of the polity, examining Gandhi, Ambedkar and the Marxists, and delved into the democratic revolution that was going on as a parallel movement from the 1930s to 1942. Her greatest contribution is an in-depth study of the areas of Mysore, Andhra Pradesh and Hyderabad. Here, she gives us a clear insight into the anti-caste ideology as a movement in India.

Gail's 100-page booklet, *Dalit Visions*, published by Orient Longman in 1995, gives a snapshot of the entire anti-caste and anti-untouchability movements that have evolved after the non-Brahmin movement. She conceptualized Jyotiba Phule's ideas and how Ramabai, Tarabai and others looked at patriarchy within Hinduism. How the Dalit radical movement in the 1920s talked about the Aryan conquest, while BR Ambedkar talked about the counter-revolution. She also gives Periyar's point of view where the national question and aspects of Delhi's rule as politics were initiated by Periyar. Then she brings in the problems of feudal backwardness by analysing the Dalit Panther movement.

Gail finished a 150-page biography of BR Ambedkar in 2004 but eventually moved into understanding caste, bringing across a wide range of anti-caste intellectual movements in the country, starting with Bhakti saints Namdev, Kabir, Ravidas, Tukaram and Kartabhaja.

Then she focused on Phule, Ayothee Das, Ramabai, Periyar and Ambedkar for understanding the anti-caste sentiment in the country.

In our process to make India a casteless society, we also need to understand the anti-caste movements that have taken place and the resistance they faced. As India moves towards fighting caste and the privileges of those who dominate the social sphere, Gail's contribution is immense. She told us how the movements took place, starting from the women's struggle of the 1970s, and how the social struggles evolved by conceptualizing them into philosophical ideas in her book *Seeking Begum Pura* (2008). She also visited the anti-caste assertion through Buddhism in her work *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste* (2003).

In her book '*Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*', Omvedt has given a historical survey of Buddhism in India taking Dr. Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism as its starting point. She shows how over a period of 2500 years, Buddhism has been engaged in a struggle against caste-hierarchy. She has researched both the original sources of the Buddhist canon and recent literature to provide an absorbing account of the historical, social, political and philosophical aspects of Buddhism. In the process, she discusses a wide range of important issues of current concern." "Providing an entirely new interpretation of the origins and development of the caste system, which boldly challenges the 'Hindutva' version of history. Hence, it has challenged Brahmanism, the main exploitative system of traditional Indian society, and instead endeavoured to build religious egalitarianism.

In her study of *Reinventing Revolution: New Social Movements and the Socialist Tradition in India*, [Gail Omvedt](#) describes and analyses the new social movements that have arisen in India over the past two decades, in particular the anti-caste movement (of both the untouchables and the lower-middle castes), the women's liberation movement, the farmers' movement (centred on struggles arising out of their integration into a state-controlled capitalist market), and the environmental movements (opposition to destructive development,

including resistance to big dam projects and the search for alternatives). Rooted in participant observation, it focuses on the ideologies and self-understanding of the movements themselves. The central themes of this book are the origin of movements in the socio-economic contradictions of post-independence India; their effect on political developments, in particular, the disintegration of Congress hegemony; their relation to "traditional Marxist" theory and Communist practice; and their groping toward a synthesis of theory and practice that constitutes a new social vision distinct from traditional Marxism.

Tukoba (Tukaram) was a seventeenth-century Bhakti Sant (saint-poet) of the Varkari movement in Maharashtra. He is still considered the best Marathi poet. These new translations by Gail Omvedt and Bharat Patankar seek to capture the wonder of his writing, his lyricism and his profound meanings in their book on '*Songs of Tukoba*'.

In their book, '*Social Justice Philanthropy: Approaches and Strategies of Funding Organizations*', Gail Omvedt, Sukhdeo Throat and Martin Macwan used in India by different types of philanthropic organizations in addressing the problems of society. Such philanthropic organizations include community-based national and international organizations, corporate sector organizations, family-based organizations, and those run by the government. While the book brings insights into the priorities that these organizations accord, it especially looks into the question of whether these organizations address the issue of social justice and supports the efforts of non-government organizations (NGOs) that take up the issue of social exclusion in India – associated with caste, untouchability, ethnicity, and gender - through projects that deal with disadvantaged groups, such as Dalits and tribals. Not much research has been done in India on social justice philanthropy related to caste and ethnic groups, and their gender and class dimensions. Their study provides insight into this neglected theme.

In her book, '*Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*', Omvedt traces the history

of the Dalit movement from its beginning in the 19th century to the death of its most famous leader, B.R. Ambedkar, in 1956. Focusing on three states--Andhra, Maharashtra and Karnataka--Dr Omvedt analyses the ideology and organization of the movement and its interaction both with the freedom struggle (particularly with Gandhi and Gandhism) and the 'class' struggles of the workers and peasants (and their dominant ideology-Marxism). She also provides a historical account of the origin and development of the caste system.

In their book, '*Growing Up Untouchable: A Dalit Autobiography Among Others* (2000)', Vasant Moon, Gail Omvedt and Eleanor Zelliott View: 'In this English translation, Moon's story is usefully framed by apparatus necessary to bring its message to even those taking their first look at South Asian culture...The result is an easy-to-digest short course on what it means to be a Dalit, in the words of one notable Dalit.'-Journal of Asian Studies.

Gail and Eleanor Zelliott (1926-2016) were the two US-born researchers who had a deep insight into India's social and anti-caste movements. Both made Maharashtra their core academic platform and produced further research on Bhakti saints and were a part of the Marathi literary renaissance through Dalit literature. Their understanding of the Ambedkarite school spun off several research and their ideas dominate today's academia. Both Gail and Eleanor also influenced Western academia to look into Ambedkar, Phule and the anti-caste struggle in India, resulting in immense research, including Christophe Jaffrelot's 2004 work *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analyzing and Fighting Caste*.

While Dalits around the world continue to mourn her absence, Omvedt left us with *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anti-caste Intellectuals*, her one of the last books, which contains a vision of an egalitarian, anti-caste utopia conceived of by 15th- and 19th-century Dalit writers. In the spirit of holding on to hope, as difficult as that might currently seem, that vision is something none of us can stop striving for.

In *Seeking Begumpura*, Omvedt works to recover what she calls “utopian” visions of society from the corpus of teachings and writings, songs, poetry and prose of various Dalit and Bahujan intellectuals since the 15th century. This heralds the “modern era” for Omvedt, much earlier than conventional scholarship, and allows her not to simply see modernity as a ‘gift’ of colonialism. The visionaries that Omvedt references since the advent of British colonialism in the 18th century were not easily viewed as either anti-colonial or anti-modern. Instead, they made complex assessments of British colonialism (and Mughal rule before it) as having brought positive changes in socioeconomic life, but also having failed to break the fetters of caste.

From a Marxist perspective, Omvedt identifies the hope expressed by these anti-caste thinkers of long ago within narratives of the development of society’s forces of production, and their social organisation at that time. Thus, we are able to see how early modern visionaries such as Nama, Kabir, Ravidas, Tuka, Kartabhaja and Namasudra of Bengal, and late-modern ones such as Phule, Iyothee Thass, Pandita Ramabai, Periyar and Ambedkar had to make their own histories and visions of utopia under conditions, not of their own choosing (Natrajan:2008).

Omvedt also works to rescue the radical anti-caste vision of the Kartabhajas of Bengal, who spoke about ‘caste mixing’; as well as the works of Kabir, who denounced casteism, ideas of pollution, the ‘book knowledge’ of priestly specialists, and ritual practice. Both the Kartabhajas and Kabir have long been co-opted by various conservative forces. Finally, Omvedt underscores the fact that, unlike the “professional renouncer” enjoying institutionalised support, the radical bhakta is almost always a householder with responsibilities – one who is simply acutely conscious of social relations, all of which contribute to their social visions.

Views about Gail Omvedt

If scholars (fellow travellers) Uma Chakravarti, V Geetha, Kalpana Kannabiran, Vibhuti Patel, and Surinder S Jodhka among others speak about Gail’s intellectual journeys and the insights she produced in her academic writings, a later generation of Dalit activists are fueled by her vision of Begumpura.

Thenmozhi Soundararajan, executive director of Equality Labs, a Dalit civil rights organisation, writes: “Her intellect and practical but principled praxis have intergenerational impacts. As she transitions from elder to ancestor, we will build on the world of resistance her words broke open for Dalits like me. In her memory, we will continue shaping strong, growing movements for caste equity here in the US, and across the global South Asian diaspora — anywhere caste-oppressed people require freedom from harm and the hope of a vibrant future.”

Jodhka writes about the scholar Gail who “had continued to remain outside the institutional context of the university teaching departments and research organisations shine on complex social phenomena”.

Chakravarti’s essay is an inquiry into her own evolution as a scholar and the pivotal role Gail played in that journey. It plots Gail’s own intellectual excursions in the worlds of scholarship concerning caste, class, gender, patriarchy, women, land relations and ownership, farming, alternate histories of Maharashtra and so on.

As Geetha writes, “Her (Gail’s) studies of Phule and his times, the non-brahmans in Bombay union politics, the relationship between communists, nationalists and the non-brahman movement are very valuable for what they tell us about the emergence of a distinctive third sort of politics in late colonial India. As much as nationalism and communism, anti-caste assertion was a response to the times, and its adherents straddled several political traditions, seeking to align them along the plane of common justice.”

Partner Bharat Patankar’s long memoir is a note of love about a soulmate who were a family, an intellectual companion, and a fellow organiser. It is both a personal story as well as intellectual history, of the restive ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s, when new mobilisations, theoretical inquiries and social movements were challenging established ideas of working-class politics. The article travels through the United States and India, different time zones, with no lines separating private and public worlds, personal and political inquiries.

Patankar writes: “Gail brings forward that there is no basic contradiction between Ambedkarism and Marxism. She does this in a very tender and loving manner which she learned from Buddha himself and Raidas, Tukoba, Soyraibai, Chokhamela, and Namdev-Janabai. This is the bond that held us together throughout our lives and made our companionship romantic and creative.” This book is about ideas, friendships, politics, music, food, and hope. It brims with affection for a romantic humanist (as Prachi describes her mother) who loved people without inhibitions and imagined a world without borders and inequities.

Ajit Abhyankar, the senior leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), said Omvedt was the first researcher to study the political implication of the Satyashodhak Samaj, started by social reformer Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, which spurred new research in this field. “The assertion of the political identity of the movement was of immense help to the Leftist movement in the state,” he said. An active member of Shramik Mukti Dal, which she co-founded with her husband, Omvedt worked for the betterment of abandoned women in Sangli and Satara.

Gail was also on the board of institutes like Savitribai Phule Pune University, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies and Indira Gandhi Open University. In recent years she was associated with the United Nations Development Programme as a consultant on various issues. Her life itself spans the evolution of post-Independence social struggles in India and how they progressed or failed. Her life also tells us how future generations can learn to fight and seek equal rights or learn from the successes and failures of anti-caste intellectuals.

Controversy and Criticism

Andre Beteille's criticism

Omvedt's portrayal of caste discrimination and violence as forms of “racism” was opposed by the Indian government (NPR,2001) and sociologists in India, including Andre Beteille, who while acknowledging that discrimination exists, deeply opposed to treating caste as a form of racism "simply to protect against prejudice and

discrimination", describing such attempts as "politically mischievous" and "worse, scientifically nonsense"(The Hindu, 2001; Beteille,2001). Beteille argues (that):

In the past, some groups claimed superior rights on the ground that they belonged to the Aryan race or the Teutonic race. The anthropologists rejected such claims on two grounds: first, on the ground that within the same human species no race is superior to any other; but also, on the ground that there is no such thing as an Aryan race or a Teutonic race. We cannot throw out the concept of race by the front door when it is misused for asserting social superiority and bring it in again through the back door to misuse it for the cause of the oppressed. The metaphor of race is a dangerous weapon whether it is used for asserting white supremacy or for making demands on behalf of disadvantaged groups (Beteille, 2006)

Marxist critique

Omvedt was criticized for a perceived "anti-statist" bias in her writing as well as "neo-liberal" economic sympathies. Scholars have also questioned the sincerity of her claims regarding the "authenticity" of her work, writing (Ghadar:1998).

In this paragraph, Omvedt is transformed from a dangerous American outsider to a revolutionary insider, a player of a song proclaiming: 'We will cut the throats of the rich!' The chapter strategically ends with these words, which, written and sung though they are by anonymous labourers, can be heard only through Omvedt's (technological) agency. The rest, as they say, is history. The remainder of the book unsubtly suggests what Omvedt does not say explicitly--that she has accepted the leadership role thrust upon her by the initially skeptical masses.

Alternative vision

Srinivasulu (2021) discusses the alternative vision of Gail Omvedt as follows: Omvedt's study of caste which began with the study of the anti-caste tradition of Phule and Satyashodak movement and expanded to the study of Dr BR Ambedkar and later included in a

deeper historical grounding of caste phenomenon tracing it back to Buddha through Bhakti to the present period.

It is quite often that caste is sought to be presented in simple oppositional terms — Brahmin vs Bahujan, upper caste vs. lower castes. In contrast, in reality, caste has never been simple and straight but rather been quite complex, multi-dimensional and intersectional. The dialectical nature of caste and anti-caste comes out clearly in Omvedt's analyses of the Dalit movement (1979), of Hindutva (1990a), the anti-reservation movement (1990b) and the creation of new consolidation of *Savarna* ideological and political regroupings. Omvedt in her work had sought to capture the spiritual and ideal dimension of the pre-modern and medieval anti-caste movements as an indispensable and essential dimension of the emancipation of the lower castes.

Drawing on the Gramscian distinction between the popular and elite religions we can differentiate within the broad rubric of Hinduism between highly literate Brahminism and the subaltern religious practices. The differences between them are not merely of social caste-class in character but in fact substantially those of rituals, practices, idols and imaginaries.

What is interesting is that vision(s) of an alternative social system, the imagination of a better society that is egalitarian and just is available in the subaltern religious practices. For instance, if the elite Brahminical imagination idealizes the imagery of Ram Rajya then we can map alternative subaltern ideal social vision in medieval *Sant-Kavis* (saint-poets). Sant Ravidas's Begumpura, Kabir's Amrapura, Tukaram's Pandaripura and Phule's Balistan are the abodes of equality, freedom and a just society.

Omvedt sought to recover this alternative vision and imagination in her book *Seeking Begumpura: Social Vision of Anti-caste Saints and Intellectuals*. She explored the counter-hegemonic imagination of a casteless, classless, and egalitarian *pura* (city) where everybody could lead a meaningful and dignified life in the non-Brahminical thinkers of the Bhakti tradition to draw upon for contemporary challenges.

Gail Omvedt's work on Buddhist - Bhakti - Bahujan - Ambedkarite thought as an intellectual ideological movement, as anti-Brahminical anti-Savarna revolt and as spiritual-cultural-ideological counter-hegemonic resource assumes significance in the light of the reconfiguration of Indian electoral-power and cultural politics resulting from the decline of the liberal hegemony drawing its support and legitimacy from the legacy of the nationalist movement and the rise of Hindutva as a major politico-ideological hegemonic force and the inability and stagnation of the Left (socialist and communist) traditions to face the challenges posed by the neo-liberal Hindutva hegemony (Srinivasulu:2019).

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