



In memory of Gail Omvedt (1941–2021)
**A Social Scientist Who Strived
for Social Transformation**
Vibhuti Patel

Image credit: Gail Omvedt at the First National Conference on Perspective for Women's Liberation Movement in India, 1980 Mumbai by Vibhuti Patel

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Introduction

After Professor Gail Omvedt passed away on 25 August 2021, major discourses have begun to reflect on the collective memories of her work as a theorist, philosopher and sociologist, feminist activist, translator, political revolutionary and trusted comrade of innumerable local struggles of the marginalised communities. Scholars and activists have organised innumerable memorial meetings continuously for two weeks at local, regional, national and international levels. The obituaries and tributes, fond memories and testimonies of dalit-bahujan students, scholars, social-cultural-political activists have been published in English, Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati, Tamil and many

more regional languages with great affection, respect, reverence and praise for her intellectual rigour and robust scholarship. Scholarly debates around the knowledge production by Gail to evolve a macro-perspective on land, water, caste, class and gender have taken place, using the prism of Marxism and Phule-Shahu-Ambedkarite perspective.¹

Formative Years in USA

Gail Omvedt grew up in a progressive family, imbibing values of racial harmony. As a child, she developed a sensitivity to the hardships of Afro-American, Hispanic and Asian students in her school and in the community. In her youth, she became active in the civil rights movement

and anti-Vietnam War movement during the late sixties. Remembering those days, often Gail would sing a song, Little Boxes, a political satire against the conformist American middle class under the McCarthy period, written and composed by Malvin Reynolds in 1962.

Little boxes on the hillside, Little boxes made of ticky tacky, Little boxes on the hillside, Little boxes look all the same.

Gail in India

During 1963, Gail visited India for her internship and learnt Marathi during her one-year stay. She came to India again in 1971 for her reference work on her PhD thesis on 'Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahmin Movement in Maharashtra'. In 1976, her thesis was published by the Scientific Socialist Publication Trust in Mumbai. In the post-Emergency period, newly emerging groups of dalit youth, tribal movement and women's rights collectives found the perspective put forward by this book that scrutinised 'caste' under the Marxian lens of mode of production and relations of production and 'class' under Phule- Shahu- Ambedkarite lens appealing, realist

and locally-rooted. In 1978, she married a politically active doctor, Dr Bharat Patankar, the son of a freedom fighter and women's rights activist schoolteacher Indutai Patankar in Kasegaon and settled down with him and her mother in-law. While she was pregnant with her daughter, she was actively involved in the solidarity work of the riot-affected dalit communities in Marathwada. In the same year, anti-dalit riots took place in response to the renaming of Marathwada University to Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, intensifying the debate around caste and class. Gail was invited for study circles, brainstorming sessions, public meetings and padayatras by tribal, dalit and local feminist groups from every nook and corner of Maharashtra and she travelled extensively making new acquaintances and forging long-lasting friendships. Even during her pregnancy, she travelled extensively under harsh circumstances and after the birth of her daughter, Prachi, Gail, Bharat and Indutai attended meetings and rallies carrying the baby.

Gail as a Social Theorist

Gail Omvedt over the last 50 years, has highlighted critical concerns of rural, tribal and dalit-bahujan masses in India. For five decades, she made path-breaking and revolutionary contributions by creatively taking ahead the Phule-Shahu-Ambedkar perspective of exposing caste-based exploitation and exposing the complex interplay of 'caste-class-gender' to reproduce the oppressive social order. As feminists, we found Gail's commitment simply astounding! Her evidence-based insightful contributions, her commitment to the dialogical and emic approach of ethnographic methodologies and field-based surveys on deserted women, women-headed households, land rights of rural women, exploitation of working-class women, violence against women by extensive travelling in the most neglected parts of rural and tribal hinterlands under extremely difficult circumstances touched the minds and hearts of hundreds of social activists. Gail led a spartan lifestyle, and never complained about physical discomfort even while travelling long-distances in overcrowded state transport buses or unreserved compartments of the Indian railways during our street-fighting days. She exercised great

self-discipline and never missed her deadline for the submission of her paper, minutes of the meetings, statement, draft of pamphlet, booklet, monograph and orations.

Building Bridges in the Social Movements

Gail Omvedt was an accessible public intellectual and strongly grounded philosopher. She reached out to four generations of social scientists and social and political activists. Her ideas travelled with her in 25 authored books and innumerable articles in scholarly journals written in a lucid style. Her physical presence and interventions in study circles, *shibirs*, camps of youth organisations, seminars, conferences, conventions and gatherings of social movements resulted in strengthening her bonds with the participants. She always invited them to visit her home in Kasegaon village, Tehsil Walwa, Sangli District, Maharashtra. Gail had an excellent library and was very generous with sharing her knowledge resources with colleagues and young scholars.

Gail Omvedt's most path-breaking contribution for the women's rights

movement was, *We Will Smash This Prison—Indian Women in Struggle*, which brought her close to, first of all, the women's rights movement and later on to the women's studies movement. Her books—*Cultural Revolt in Colonial Society: Non-Brahmin Movements in Western India*; *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*; *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*; *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*; and *Reinventing Revolutions: New Social Movements and the Socialist Tradition in India*—are included in the syllabi of social sciences course universities in India and abroad. *Seeking Begampura* profiles the dreams and visions of classless, casteless, caring and egalitarian society of Bhakti poets such as Ravidas, Kabir, Chokhamela, Janabai, Tukaram, the Kartabhajas and social reformers of the nineteenth century such as Jyotiba Phule, Iyothee Thass, Pandita Ramabai, Periyar and Ambedkar. Gail and Bharat translated from Marathi into English Phule's *Shetkaryacha Asud* (The Whipcord of the Cultivators) and Tukaram's *Abahnga*. She has mentored hundreds of dalit/OBC/Tribal/Bahujan students as head of the Phule-Ambedkar Chair in Savitribai Phule Pune University, as a

Professor of Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (Delhi), Savitribai Phule Chair of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU-Delhi), and as a guest professor at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (Copenhagen).

Contribution Towards Social Transformatory Processes

The most influential theoretical analysis of Gail was her insightful profiling of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial political economy of India using the prism of caste dynamics in the mode of production and relations of production and day-to-day material reality of survival struggles of dalit, bahujan and tribal communities. In the women's movement, Gail never used the term 'subaltern feminism' as she considered it an epistemological violence. She used the term 'socialist feminism' that is committed to fight against all forms of layered hierarchies, determined by the interplay of caste, class, race, ethnicity, religion and sex. She used this framework much before the term 'intersectional feminism' and 'gender analysis' came into currency. She creatively 'decolonised' feminism by integrating in her theorisation,

the local experiences of the workers and peasants whose predicaments were determined by caste, class and gender. Her feminism was the feminism of 99 per cent of women doing paid and unpaid work in the rural, urban and forest areas. She highlighted ecological concerns and livelihood issues such as access to land and water resources for women and brought to the fore local knowledge and the local tradition of rural poor women. Through her insightful field-based analysis, she succinctly retheorised, conveying that rural poor women cannot be seen as one homogeneous category as they are internally different. Gail's study on 'deserted women' (*parityakta*, a term coined by Indutai and Gail) made a convincing case about the multiple burdens of single, divorced, widowed and abandoned women because of the inequalities based on caste, class, sex and the social stigma against *parityakta*. She felt strongly that in building social movements against an oppressive order, we should also organise against false binaries. Similarly, she reframed Phule's contribution not only as social reformer, but as a revolutionary who challenged the caste patriarchy in her praxis as well as in her writings and verses.

Respect for Plural Perspectives

Even when she differed with scholars, her arguments were directed at analysis and ideas, never at persons who professed them. Hence, she remained their friend even after she stopped working with them due to ideological and political differences. I am one of them. Gail will live with us through her voluminous body of socially relevant writings and her vision of 'Begumpura' where there is no exploitation and oppression based on caste/ethnicity/race/region, ablism, caste and gender.

Note

Gail's highly acclaimed books (see below) have been enthusiastically discussed by the younger generation of Dalit-Tribal-Bahujan scholars and social activists after her demise.

1. *Cultural revolt in a colonial society (1976). The non-Brahman movement in Maharashtra.* Scientific Socialist Education Trust.
2. *Violence against women: New movements and new theories in India (1991).* Kali for Women.
3. *Reinventing revolution: New social movements and the socialist tradition in India (1993).* M. E. Sharpe.
4. *Gender and technology: Emerging Asian visions (1994)* co-authored with Govind Kelkar. Asian Institute of Technology.
5. *Dalits and the democratic revolution (1994).* Dr Ambedkar and the dalit movement in

colonial India. SAGE Publications.

6. *Dalit visions: The anti-caste movement and Indian cultural identity* (1995). Orient Longman.

7. *Growing up untouchable: A dalit autobiography* (2000). Rowman and Littlefield.

8. *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and caste* (2003). SAGE Publications

9. *Jotirao Phule and the ideology of social revolution in India* (2004). Critical Quest.

10. *Ambedkar: Towards an enlightened India* (2005). Penguin.

11. *Seeking Begumpura: The social vision of anticaste intellectuals* (2009). Navayana.

12. *Understanding caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and beyond* (2011). Orient BlackSwan.

13. *Songs of Tukoba, translated by Gail Omvedt and Bharat Patankar* (2012). Manohar.

14. *Jotirao Phule: Shetkaryaca Asud, translated by Gail Omvedt and Bharat Patankar*. <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/library/resource/shetkaryaca-asud-the-whipcord-of-the-cultivators/>

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