

Tribute

Gail Omvedt (1941-2021)

Vibhuti Patel

Feminist Activist



At the First 1st National Conference on Perspective for Women's Liberation Movement in India, December 1980

(Photo courtesy Vibhuti Patel)

Dr. Gail Omvedt, committed and courageous, prolific writer and powerful social scientists who brought to the fore Phule-Ambedkar legacy in the context of rising social movements in the post Emergency period is no more. She died on 25 August 2021 at the age of 80. Gail's close association with grass-roots movements of rural women- farmers, forest dwellers and women headed households and her involvement in the newly formed women's rights movement during late 1970s were captured in her engaging and outstanding first person account in her book, *We Shall Smash this Prison* published in 1978. She was a prolific writer and popularly known as a political theorist who pioneered non-Brahminical Marxism. Memorial meetings organised by rural groups, Dalit organisations, academic institutions, activists of grass roots movements, farmers organisations and Bahujan Groups bear witness to the fact that Gail had made a permanent mark among the progressive thinkers and practitioners.

During 1970s, 1980s and 1990s Gail and I worked together in several campaigns, padayatras, rallies, dharanas, workshops, national conferences, gatherings in rural, tribal and

urban locations, travelled together long-distance in unreserved train compartments to attend conferences in Nandurbar in 1981 and preparatory meetings for the Patna Conference on Perspective for Women's Liberation Movement in 1988, shared rooms in seminars and workshops which gave us opportunity to engage in lively discussions on political economy of caste-class-ethnic issues determining women's predicaments, caste question in mode of production and relations of production in the rural economies, entitlements of forest dwellers, gender-water-caste and land, property rights of tribal and rural women, need for rural-urban solidarity and support among other issues.

It was in the early 1970s that she first visited India for field work of her Ph.D. dissertation on *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non Brahmin Movement in Maharashtra*. In later years she made a major impact as Dr. Ambedkar Chair Professor at NISWASS in Orissa, as a Professor of Sociology at the University of Pune, as Asian Guest Professor at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Copenhagen and as a Senior Fellow at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi. She was a Visiting Professor and Coordinator, School of Social Justice, University of Pune, visiting faculty at Centre for Social Studies, Surat 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.

Personal is Political

Gail married a politically active doctor, Com Bharat Patankar in 1978 and settled down with her husband and her mother-in-law veteran feminist Com. Indutai Patankar in Kasegaon village, Maharashtra, She attended and spoke in (her own style of) Marathi at all meetings of the united front of women's liberation movement in Maharashtra along with her mother-in-law. She actively supported renaming of Marathwada University as Babasaheb Ambedkar University in 1978 and reached out to Dalit survivors of cattiest riots after the legislative assembly of Maharashtra unanimously passed a resolution for the renaming. At that time, even her pregnancy did not deter her from joining *padayatras* in solidarity with the Dalit victims of riots in Marathwada. As fellow feminists she and her mother-in-law were always together in all public events of the social movements till Indutai passed on. Her home in Kasegaon was always open to social activists, researchers and young scholars in Kasegaon. Indutai Patankar was an idol for the movement of Single Women that began in the mid-1980s. Gail and Indutai enjoyed unique camaraderie. They lead by their personal examples. She encouraged, inspired and mentored thousands of Dalits, Adivasis, Bahujan men and women to dedicate their lives for social transformatory processes.

Gail 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 was a huge inspiration to so many of us. I was fortunate to have a long association with Indutai and with her also Gail and Bharat when I became part of the Stree Mukti Sangharsh Chalwal from the mid 90's. After Indutai passed away four years ago my visits to Kasegaon

never happened so I met Gail only a few times when she came to Pune. Her work will continue to inspire generations to come for the struggle against caste patriarchy and for a better world

Gail was an active participant of the workshops and group discussions of early feminist discourses on paid and unpaid work of women, agrarian relations and rural women's survival struggles, livelihood strategies of women headed households of widows, deserted, divorced and single women. She put her ideas upfront, she always attended meeting with her typed notes and discussion points that conveyed that she had done considerable homework for the meaningful and result oriented discussions. She contributed to the women's liberation movement in Maharashtra immensely. She not only translated Marathi and Bhilori feminist songs into English but also extensively quoted verses of these songs in her theoretically dense research papers and monographs. She generously shared rare literature on the student's movements against racism and against anti-Vietnam war and the international women's liberation movement during the early 1970s. Her in-depth understanding on Satya Shodhak Movement of Jyotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule contributed towards historical sense to the emerging feminist consciousness in India. She enthusiastically took part in the Stree Mukti Sangharsh Parishad in Pune during Emergency Rule.

Gail represented rural and tribal women's concerns in the state level network organisation Stree Mukti Sampark Samiti. After the nation-wide anti-rape movement, when the newly formed women's groups spread all over the country expressed the need for a National Conference and Forum Against Oppression of Women took the lead to host the 1st National Conference on Perspective for Women's Liberation Movement in India in December 1980, Gail was active in the preparatory Committee. During the conference, she prepared minutes for the sub-group on Women and Work. Gail always fulfilled her promise, whether it was an organisational work or an intellectual work. In 1981, we attended Asian Conference against Sexual Violence organised by Upendra Baxi in Surat and from there we went to attend the Convention of tribal women in Nandurbar in an over-crowded railway compartment by narrow gauge train with coal engine in the company of goats and chickens and their owners. In 1988, we worked together for a massive mobilisation of rural and tribal women in a National Conference in Patna.

A Prolific Writer

Gail's highly acclaimed writings brought out her deep theoretical insights that came from local experiences and connected with the global perspective. Gail's intellectual honesty gained her an unconditional acceptance even among those who did not completely agree with her. Her views on support to *Shetkari Sanathana* movement led by rich farmers in 1990 and policy of liberalisation and globalisation in 1991 were not acceptable to many activists working with the urban and rural poor. Still, she enjoyed trust of social movements of Dalits-Adivasis-Bahujan who respected Gail for her following path-breaking contributions over three decades. Some of her works are listed at the end of this piece.

Our heartfelt condolences to Gail's caring companion Comrade Dr. Bharat Patankar and affectionate daughter, Prachi Patankar. Gail lives with us through her writings. We salute

Gail Omvedt for her revolutionary spirit, passion for social change and caste-less society, commitment for women's rights, intersectional feminist analysis and revolutionary praxis.

Selected writings of Gail Omvedt

Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Maharashtra (Scientific Socialist Education Trust, 1976)

We Shall Smash This Prison: Indian Women in Struggle (1979. Zed 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)

Jotirao Phule and the Ideology of Social Revolution in India (Delhi: Critical Quest, 2004)

Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India (Penguin, 2005)

Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anti-caste Intellectuals (New Delhi, Navayana, 2009)

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)

