

Bengaluru academics salute Gail Omvedt

The US-born sociologist, who passed away on Wednesday, gave a new direction to the study of caste and class, they say

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TEAM METMROLIFE



Gail Omvedt. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

A classical debate in sociology: Should a culture be studied by insiders or outsiders?

When it comes to Gail Omvedt's work, there's no doubt about the significance of the latter, academics in Bengaluru say.

Born in Minneapolis, US, she took Indian citizenship in 1983 and went on to become a 'gale force' in academia.

Gail passed away on Wednesday in Sangli village of Maharashtra, following a brief illness. She was 81. She is survived by her Marxist-activist husband Bharat Patankar and their daughter Prachi, son-in-law Tejaswi and granddaughter Nia.

Sociologists from Bengaluru tell *Metrolife* what made her discourse stand out.

'Blended many ideas'

According to Sobin George, who teaches sociology at Institute for Social and Economic Change, Gail did what no academician had done in the 1970s – study caste from the prism of class.



Sobin George

"The Marxist influence is evident in her early writings. Later, as she stayed in the villages and participated in protests, her writings started reflecting those experiences. She was no arm-chair academic," he says.

In her book 'Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond', she draws on Buddhist writings to contextualise Dalit movements inspired by Dr Ambedkar and deconstructs the varna system that texts like *Manusmriti* tend to legitimise. Students must read it, he says.

'Popularised Phule'

Gail played a big role in pop-

SHE WORE MANY HATS

Social media is awash with tributes on Dalit-Bahujan forums. Historian Ramchandra Guha, and politicians such as Sitaram Yechury, Uddhav Thackeray and Sharad Pawar have mourned her passing. It is an irreplaceable loss, they say, and it is not hard to see why. Her PhD thesis on Mahatma Phule's Satyashodhak Movement of the 1870s, and her books 'Dalits and Democratic Revolution' (1994), and 'Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India (2008)' are

seminal works. Her writing was nuanced and stayed away from cliches. As an activist, she led several Dalit-Bahujan protests. As a feminist, she wrote the book 'We Shall Smash This Prison: Indian Women in Struggle' (1980). And as an environmentalist, she rallied for people displaced by a dam project. Her ideology, experts believe, was shaped by her time in the US in the 1960s, a decade marked by the civil rights movement, anti-war cries and political killings.

ularising the ideas of social reformer Jyotirao Phule outside India, says Anuplal Gopalan, head of the department of Industrial Relations and Sociology, St Joseph's College (Autonomous).



Anuplal Gopalan

"Her study on caste was systematic. She based them on the works of three great people – Buddha, Ambedkar, and Phule," he explains and lauds her decision to stay back in India. He differs from Gail's work in equating caste prejudice with race discrimination. "I feel she committed a mistake there," he says.

Critical objectivity

Sometime in 1997, Gail walked into sociologist G K Karanth's office in Bengaluru. He quickly got over the embarrassment of not recognising her and was happy to learn that "a great scholar" was interested in the report that

he and Simon R Charsley had written on social mobility among Dalits.



GK Karanth

Gail would go on to write a critical review of an article based on this report.

"Although she was impressed with my work, she did not spare me. That's what I call academic professionalism. That you may be academic friends but you don't shy away from taking a stand on certain things," he says.

'Influential feminist'

Sudha Sitharaman, a Bengalurean academic who taught sociology at Pondicherry University, says Gail was a lot more than a sociologist.

"She wrote interesting books and was a good teacher. Her contributions to feminism are influential. She was lenient toward leftist principles but was no extremist," she says.