

TRIBUTE

Voice of Dalits

Gail Omvedt (1941-2021) was an unabashed individual thinker whose works covered caste, class, gender, economics, tribal issues and socio-agricultural matters. BY **LYLA BAVADAM**

THE death of the social scientist Gail Omvedt on August 25 in her home at Kasegaon in Maharashtra in the Sangli district marks the end of an era of activism combined with academic rigour. She was 80 years old.

Hers was an extraordinary life. Born in Minneapolis in the United States, she chose India first as her academic and research home and later as her permanent home after she married Dr Bharat Patankar. She became an Indian citizen in 1983. She came to India for research on her doctoral thesis on the "Non-Brahman Movement in Western India", taking inspiration from Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and other social reformers.

One of her primary areas of interest was the writings and philosophies of Jyotiba Phule and Dr B.R. Ambedkar. She brought them into public consciousness in the 1970s when social activism was on the rise. In many ways, she was the voice of the Dalit community at a time when its struggle had not yet received public validation.

Dalit activists who had attended the World Conference Against Racism in 2001 in Durban, South Africa, had likened caste discrimination to racial discrimination. They had argued that both saw the discriminated groups as inferior. Gail Omvedt had supported the activists' stand.

She was openly critical of religious scriptures for similarly putting down a section of society. In an open letter in 2000 to Bangaru Laxman, the then Bharatiya Janata Party



THE HINDU ARCHIVES

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(BJP) president, which was published in *The Hindu*, she stated her position on the Rig Veda: "As for the Vedas they are impressive books, especially the Rg Veda. I can only say this only from translations, but I am glad that the ban on women and shudras reading them has been broken, and that good translations by women and shudras themselves are available. But to take them as something holy? Read them for yourself! Most of the hymns are for success in war, cattle-stealing, love-making and the like. They celebrate

conquest; the hymns about Indra and Vrtra sound suspiciously 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 Rg Veda gives evidence of enmity between the Aryans and those they called *dasyus, panis* and the like."

Her works were almost all-encompassing, covering caste, class, gender, economics, tribal issues and socio-agricultural matters, particularly with reference to rural women.

She had numerous publications to her credit. These included *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India* (2011); *Ambedkar: Towards and Enlightened India* (2008); "Jotirao Phule and the Ideology of Social Revolution in India" (*Economic & Political Weekly*, September 1971); *Dalit and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (1994); *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond* (2012); *We Will Smash This Prison: Indian Women in Struggle* (1980); *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anticaste Intellectuals* (2009); and *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste* (2003). *We Will Smash This Prison* was a powerful recollection of her own involvement, along with Indutai Patankar, the veteran communist leader and her mother-in-law, in the women's rights movement in India.

SHRAMIK MUKTI DAL

Gail Omvedt and Bharat Patankar, along with other social activists, formed the Shramik Mukti Dal in 1980 to organise farmers and peasants. The sociopolitical organisation incorporated communist thought along with the liberating principles propounded by Jyotiba Phule and Ambedkar. They dealt with issues such as water rights, caste oppression and the rights of those affected by infrastructure projects.

Her convictions gave her an energy and drive, and with a personality that was far from being a shrinking violet, she was at the forefront of public protests, padayatras, rallies and conferences, addressing them in adequate Marathi to get her message across. Her foreign origins were never a deterrent either with her or with the authorities who treated her with kid gloves because of her intellectual fire and because of the support she had from the levels of society she wrote about.

Gail Omvedt's Wikipedia biography says she "studied at Carleton College, Minnesota, and at UC Berkeley, where she earned her PhD

in sociology in 1973.... 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 U.N. agencies and NGOs, served as a Dr Ambedkar Chair Professor at NISWASS [National Institute of Social Work and Social Sciences] in Orissa [now Odisha], 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, the 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."

About a decade ago, this correspondent accompanied the Nationalist Congress Party leader Sharad Pawar on his election tour in Sangli. The conversation veered on to the subject of social movements of Maharashtra, and, inevitably, Gail Omvedt's name was mentioned. Pawar said he admired her strength, dedication and the way she had chosen to live in rural Maharashtra. He shook his head in admiration and used a Marathi phrase meaning 'formidable woman' or words to that effect. He, as a politician, and she, as an activist-academic, occupied different world views, but she was dedicated enough to draw his admiration and he was gracious enough to express it.

BIG DAMS ISSUE

Inevitably, there were clashes and disagreements. A complete and unabashed individual thinker, she incorporated many views to encompass her beliefs and principles.

In 1999, the Narmada Bachao Andolan was at a low ebb but it received an instant boost with the publication of writer Arundhati Roy's essay "The Greater Common Good".

The hard-hitting essay laid bare the negative impact of big dams. Gail Omvedt had a different opinion and did not hesitate to express it. She wrote an open letter entitled "Big Dams in India: Necessities or Threats?" to Arundhati Roy in July 1999, expressing herself in the crisp, no-nonsense style that makes all her writing so readable.

The letter stated: "Dear Arundhati, I'm sorry to have to write a critical letter to you. I very much liked 'The God of Small Things'. I also appreciated your intervention on the nuclear issue. I was impressed on reading in Indian Express that you had decided to donate some royalties to the Dalit Sahitya Academy. However, when it comes to the issue of 'big dams', I can understand the urgency you feel for the people of the valley and the victims of misguided development projects everywhere, but I feel that you're missing many things. There are important questions not only regarding the dam-afflicted but also the drought afflicted, issues of water for agriculture, and of democracy in people's movements.

"Are you so convinced that the thousands of dams built since Independence have been an unmitigated evil? Or that the goal should not be to restructure and improve them rather than abandon them? Or that the struggle should not be to unite all the rural people aspiring to a life of prosperity and achievement in the modern world—drought-afflicted and dam-affected—rather than to just take up the cause of the opposition to change?"

Without going into the rights and wrongs of big dams and unfazed by all the rightful adulation Arundhati Roy's essay was getting, Gail Omvedt publicly expressed her point of view. The letter brought out the essence of her.

A public intellectual and an original thinker who minced no words, Gail Omvedt has left a void in the world of academia and activism. Fortunately, her thought and words are preserved in her writings. Gail Omvedt is survived by her husband, daughter and granddaughter. □