

Insurgent, Passional Chronicles of Revolutionary Praxis: Reading Gail Omvedt*

Social Change

51(4) 600–607, 2021

© CSD 2021

Reprints and permissions:

in.sagepub.com/journals-permissions-india

DOI: 10.1177/00490857211051306

journals.sagepub.com/home/sch

What is ‘revolution’? How might we understand its social character, its histories and trajectories? How might we recognise revolutionaries and revolutionary action? What is the relationship between action and theory in the conceptualisation of the idea of revolution? What are the signposts of revolutionary utopias? What are its material, socio-historical, and spatio-temporal contexts? How do revolutionary solidarities evolve? What is the place of deliberative dialogue, contentious debate and disagreement in the forging of larger, more encompassing revolutionary solidarities? Gail Omvedt’s work is animated by questions on the inner worlds of revolution. This is evident from her very early writing on women’s struggles and feminist action in the 1970s (Omvedt, 1975a, 1975b, 1980, 1990) as well as in her writing on anti-caste philosophies, politics and movements well into the second decade of the 2000s.

Reading her writing as it emerged in different contexts over five decades gives us a sense of Omvedt’s deep immersion as an interlocutor of mass struggles and the shifts in her position in relation to the larger debates on specific questions at specific historical moments—feminism, struggles for land and water, ecological struggles, against Hindu majoritarianism, among others. Revisiting her corpus now, sitting as we are in the belly of an ascendant Hindu supremacist regime, opens out the stunning power of her insurgent, passionate chronicles of revolutionary praxis. These chronicles journey through social and historical contexts in search of meaning, purpose and exemplars that will help us combat our troubled present in India today, especially the rise of militant Hinduism and Hindutva. She underscores the urgency of the revolutionary project:

Out of the pleasantries of the official ideology of Hindu pluralism and tolerance and under the pressures of contemporary material deprivation and economic turbulence, has grown the modern politics of Hindutva—militant Hinduism, Hinduism as nationalism. It makes a simple addition to the claim that Hinduism is the main religion of the people of India ... Hinduism’s great virtue was its generous tolerance of other faiths, but its

* A shorter version of this article was published in *Indian Cultural Forum*, 6 September 2021. <https://indianculturalforum.in/2021/09/06/insurgent-passional-chronicles-of-revolutionary-praxis-celebrating-gail-omvedt-1941-2021/>

enemies have taken advantage of this: Hindus must now be strong, fierce and proud, and not hesitate to assert themselves. (Omvedt, 2011, p. viii)

In Omvedt's view, Dalit resistance to caste rooted in material and spiritual contexts holds the key to understanding the history and possibilities of revolutionary praxis (Omvedt, 2011). In mapping 'revolutionary praxis'—indeed revolution itself—Omvedt presents a congregation of exemplars: Buddha, Kabir, Ravidas, Tukoba, Jotiba Phule, Iyothee Thass, Periyar, Ramabai, Ambedkar and a groundswell of resistance that was unceasing and fearless (2004b, 2008a, 2008b, 2011). In doing this, she illuminates the multiple cadences of 'enlightenment' on the subcontinent that represented a philosophical cascade that surpassed the European Enlightenment that followed (Omvedt, 2008a). The ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity in the Indian imaginary that she posited were ideals liberated from the thralldom of caste, and visions that could be traced back historically connecting the emergence of Buddhism in early India to the birth of Navayana led by Dr Ambedkar (see especially Omvedt, 2004a, 2008b) into the present through literature, performance and the crafting of protest in unprecedented ways.

From her constructive critique of urban autonomous feminism to her incessant, multiple threads of interrogation of Marxist frameworks to understand India, to her chronicling of the resistance to Hinduism on the Indian subcontinent—it is this that renders Indian history intelligible: the ways in which dalits, bahujans, adivasis, peasants, workers, *primarily rural, mostly women*, fought untiringly for equality and dignity through struggles for land and water, against untouchability, for fair wages, for access to places of worship and to natural resources (Omvedt, 1993, among others); the pathways to spirituality, belonging and a higher purpose crafted from below by dalit-bahujan peoples that is materially rooted and not mediated by Brahmanical Hinduism (Omvedt, 2003); and importantly, the anti-caste interrogation of the state–ruling class nexus at different historical moments (Omvedt, 2014).

Gail Omvedt is mindful of the diverse social character of anti-caste resistance historically, presenting in the process a situated perspective on the significance of 'standpoint' to theorising and resisting the oppressions of caste:

Dalit politics, the dalit vision, in fact, requires going beyond even the term 'dalit'. In the last decades, this has become the most widely accepted word for the most oppressed and exploited sections of the caste system. But others—the 'other backward castes', the former shudras, the 'non-Brahmans' generally—have been also oppressed and exploited within the 'graded hierarchy' which Ambedkar had called caste. They have also contributed to the fight against it. Some of the most profound expressions of a 'dalit vision' have come from those who were not strictly 'dalit' themselves—people such as Phule, Periyar, Kabir and Tukaram—even, for that matter, Buddha himself, who represents the starting point of a long journey towards social equality and social justice. (Omvedt, 2011, p. xi)

As this suggests, *maithri*, conviviality, is the pivot of the anti-caste imagination which is built on the struggles for the annihilation of caste and an equalitarian

social order that resist violence and dispossession—everyday, routine and exceptional structural violence, and systemic and systematic dispossession along intersecting axes. In confronting violence and attempting to break the fetters that annihilate oppressed castes, their politics of organising reveals complex intersections between movements, ideologies and politics as lived. There are crossings, intersections, silos, rigidities and fluidities that enhance or curtail the possibilities of social movements. In her insurgent accounts of the various sites of movement politics, Omvedt opens out to view the stunning yet fraught nature of these debates and politics. In *Reinventing Revolution* (Omvedt, 1993), for instance, she looks at the discrete struggles and the continuities between Naxalbari, dalit Panthers, farmers' movements, women's movements, and ecological movements, and addresses the question of whether new social movements have 'arrived':

Hardly, for the caste oppression, patriarchy, loot of peasants' labor and natural resources, drought, and environmental destruction that they have protested against goes on. The parties, left and center, keep backtracking and 'betraying' their promises, and the movements can get no direct representation in the party structure and have failed to form an alternative political front of their own ... [T]he preeminence of traditional Marxism among the opposition has been shaken up by the slogans and theories raised by the activists of the new movements; yet no new alternative, no differently articulated version of socialism has as yet emerged as a political force. The new social movements have thus arrived on the threshold of an alternative model of politics and development, but they are as yet unable to cross it, while the unmapped terrain beyond is barely discernible. (Omvedt, 1993, p. 14)

In observing these movements from the inside, as an activist deeply invested in their gains and losses on the ground, Omvedt simultaneously embarks on a heuristic project of bridging the theoretical divide between the theory and the practice of resistance. She entered into intense academic debates on Marxism, the mode of production, women's liberation, and the distinction between 'peasant', agricultural labourer and farmer, for instance—dwelling on the centrality of lived experience to theory (Omvedt, 1993).

Take for instance her use of the term 'peasant movements' where she argues that although some prefer to call it a 'farmers' movement', no such distinction between farmer and peasant can be made in Indian languages which speak only of *kisan*, *raitu*, *Khedut*, *Shetkari* and so on. 'Whatever the spread of market forces and the changing orientation of the Indian peasants, they continue to have their social and historical roots in a tradition that has persisted for thousands of years'. Therefore, she says, she continued to use the term 'peasant' (Omvedt, 1988, p. 14, n.1).

Or her recognition that '[r]ural and toiling women's struggles occurred in many places, but they did not always yield a feminist articulation' (Omvedt, 1993, p. 84); her description of Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde as 'early feminists' who struggled against patriarchy (Omvedt, 2011); and her use of 'sexual terrorism' to describe the (anticipation of) violence that curtailed women's physical mobility

(Omvedt, 1993, p. 86), a term used later by feminist philosopher Cheri Kramarae (in Foss et al., 1999, p. 47).

Drawing on Marlene Dixon's argument that 'women are the focus of every contradiction' (quoted in Omvedt, 1975a, p. 43), Omvedt outlines the 'paradoxes and contradictions involved in women's position in Indian society, and the situation of lower-class and lower-caste women [which] is in many ways different from that of the upper class women'. In a complex and graded society like India, she argues,

it is necessary to do more than analogise that women are an 'oppressed class', a 'caste' or a 'colonised' group. It is necessary to see the position of women, the degree and nature of female subordination, as varying from class to class, ethnic group to ethnic group, and differing according to the type of society. (Omvedt, 1975a, p. 43)

In the Indian case, there are 'interacting factors' that bolster the perpetuation of women's oppression: the persistence of caste which carries vastly different implications for upper and lower-class women; the 'interaction' between these realities and the institutions of modern India; the influence and footprints of the West; and finally, the gains of centuries-long, anti-caste resistance and the freedom struggle (Omvedt, 1975a, p. 43). '[T]he greatest barriers to the full liberation of Indian women today', Omvedt asserts, 'lie not so much in the survivals of caste orthodoxy or patriarchy as in the continuing socio-economic inequalities that make it impossible for lower-class women to capitalise on the democratising gains of the nationalist period' (Omvedt, 1975a, p. 43).

In studying social movements, and tracing their genealogies to utopian imaginations, Omvedt, a feminist with an unswerving dalit-bahujan standpoint, traced the layered ways in which contemporary political formations understood and accommodated women's oppression, feudal regimes and caste orders into their articulations of politics and their critiques of power. This is particularly evident in her critical assessments of the Left in India (Omvedt, 1985), the Satyashodhak Communist Party led by Sharad Patil and his formulation of 'Marxism-Phule-Ambekarism' (Omvedt, 1990, p. 17), the Shetkari Sanghatana led by Sharad Joshi (Omvedt, 1993), and her foundational role in the Shramik Mukti Dal (SMD). The fact that women were the drivers of mass struggle was empirically infeasible acknowledged by men in these movements: 'time and time again male organisers of various Left parties testified to the fact that "women were the most militant"' (Omvedt, 1978, p. 371). She recounts a description by Partha Mukherjee of a major confrontation in Naxalbari in 1967 after two women and a policeman died the previous day:

One such village meeting was scheduled to be held in Prosadujote, largely at the initiative of the women folk who reacted sharply to the death of two women the previous evening. At this juncture, the SDO's [Sub-divisional Officer] police party was confronted by a *babble of screaming women* [emphasis added] abusing them in unspeakable language.... The overall impression one gets is that the police insisted on going ahead and the *women insisted on their returning back* [emphasis added], fearing that otherwise their menfolk would be arrested. (Quoted in Omvedt, 1993, p. 51)

Of the 10 people who died, seven were women. Omvedt observes, '[t]he militancy of women ... thus played a significant part in the historic Indian revolt', and she adds a parenthetical comment that 'by the 1980s Mukherjee's description of them shouting at their oppressors as "babble" would have been targeted as male chauvinism' (ibid).

Even while there were structural limitations to and contentious debates around the politics of these alternative political formations—Patil's 'strikingly negative conception of women's power and of sexuality, unbound by patriarchy', which 'represents a great psychological fear' of the female power principle, for instance (Omvedt, 1990, p. 20)—Omvedt underscores the praxiological significance of Patil's treatise on *Dasa-Sudra Slavery*; and his move to add 'ending women's slavery' to his Satyashodhak Communist Party's goal of ending caste as indispensable to a democratic revolution, with property rights and sexuality being core concerns (1993, p. 102). Likewise, her deep engagement with Joshi and the Shetkari Sanghatana (the subject of animated debates and disagreements on Joshi's stand on neoliberal globalisation), focusses on the organisation's specific articulations of women's liberation within the larger peasant struggle—notably, the role of the Shetkari Mahila Aghadi in stressing that women were the primary constituents of the Sanghatana, 'because women were the most exploited section of peasants' (Omvedt, 1990, p. 25). The 1986 Chandwad conference which saw the participation of over one lakh peasant women, reverberated with the slogan: '*stri shakticya jagranat stri-purush mukti*—the liberation of women and men through the awakening of women's power' (Omvedt, 1993, p. 188, see also Omvedt, 1990, pp. 22–25). In the Shramik Mukti Dal that Omvedt co-founded with Bharat Patankar, their perspective on women was ahead of any other Left party. By Omvedt's account, unless the struggle for a classless, casteless society free of women's oppression was achieved, women would remain exploited. The SMD therefore focussed on all the three liberatory aspects for the 'overall liberation of humanity' (Gaikwad & Patil, 2017). Importantly, within SMD, the movement of *parityakta* women (abandoned, divorced/deserted) from rural/small town-based groups cascaded into demands on the state for economic support and social legitimation for women to live outside the family (Omvedt, 1990, p. 39).

While this was a time that also witnessed the autonomous women's movement and feminism on the ascendant in India, Omvedt reiterates through all her accounts that the revolutionary cascade was constituted by dalit-bahujan-advansi women who absorbed in significant measure an intersectional feminist sensibility that was rooted in their life-worlds even as it held lessons for movements worldwide. In her words, 'women in movements of agricultural and poor peasantry did not simply come forward as disembodied representatives of a class' (Omvedt, 1975b, p. 44).

Intersections and Convivial Praxis

Through all her published work, Omvedt names co-travellers with whom she has agreed, disagreed and collaborated—to varying degrees. She provides a

counterpoint to reductionist readings of dalit struggles and to rural women's militancy, with respect especially to land and water—looking from drought-prone Marathwada outwards. In her words: 'I am casting my conclusion in general terms but rely for much of my information on very localistic data, in this case, field research in Maharashtra' (Omvedt, 1975a, p. 43).

Over five decades, from the late 1960s till about 2017, she looked for ways of understanding western theory in relation to the dalit-bahujan revolutionary praxis, and the ways in which dalit-bahujans reinvented the idea of revolution. She looked closely at the Left and Marxist political formations in India in an attempt to understand the reasons for the theory-practice divide that she found so glaring. She searched for the meanings of the dalit quest for insurgent spirituality.

Gail Omvedt also constantly urged intellectuals especially to step out of their comfort zones and grapple with the intense complexity of questions of liberalisation-privatisation-globalisation (LPG), reservations in the private sector, and the specific predicament of adivasis and access to natural resources in the larger LPG context. She voiced what she called 'some rather politically incorrect thoughts', because, as she put it:

Issues have to be grappled with, not dismissed. The only meaningful question is, for a Marxist (or dalit, or feminist) activist, what advances the revolution, that is, the movement towards a non-caste, non-patriarchal, equalitarian and sustainable socialist society? I continue to take this as a goal, but feel we need a little more of what Phule, Ambedkar, Tukaram. Kabir, the Buddha and Karl Marx himself—saw as independent thinking. (Omvedt, 2005, p. 4881)

In their recent work on intersectionality, sociologists Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge trace the emergence of the concept to the early Black feminist articulations of the interlocked oppressions of race, gender and class in the United States, as also to Savitribai Phule's articulation of caste and gender in colonial India (Collins & Bilge 2016, p. 3)—thus extending the work of Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) who first proposed the concept as a 'social justice construct' in the US (Collins & Bilge 2016, p. 84) geographically and historically. Writing in the 1970s and 1980s, closely familiar with African American feminist struggles and with dalit movements, Omvedt's work in India in fact presages Crenshaw's work in the US, focussing as it does on the interlocking oppressions of caste, gender and violence against women:

[W]e need to look at the different forms of violence confronted by different sections of women, the relationship between violence and caste/class/rural-urban divisions, nationality and other forms of division among women ... [Q]uestions of the interrelationship between violence, exploitation and sexuality—and their patterning among different social sections of women—go to the heart of the question of violence against women. (Omvedt, 1990, pp. 6–7)

While she references several Western feminist scholars in her work (Omvedt, 1986, 1987, 1990, for instance), she does not engage with the concept of

intersectionality, despite the praxiological overlap. By the early 1990s when Crenshaw wrote, Omvedt had shifted quite substantively to questions of rural struggles, agrarian crises, and anti-caste philosophies—where she continued to observe women’s engagement in resistance, but was less involved in international feminist debates. Yet, her work offers rich possibilities for scholars interested in the genealogies of intersectionality and their relevance in understanding dalit-bahujan women’s radicalism. So also the case with the articulations of decolonial imaginations that challenge power at every site—in India particularly, the colonising juggernaut of Hindutva.

We also have debates globally today on the *Second Convivialist Manifesto* proposed by the Convivialist International (2020). The ‘declaration of interdependence’ sets out the normative theoretical position for human cooperation, solidarity, equal human dignity and the ‘necessity of its social realisation’ (convivialism) as well as its ‘lived praxis’ (conviviality) (Adloff, 2019; Caillé, 2020). In her work (published and political), *Maithri*—which interweaves convivialism and conviviality—has been at the centre of Omvedt’s universe. This is a concept that has its roots in anti-caste philosophies and dalit-bahujan-advansi revolutionary praxis. Engaging with the futures of the convivialist manifesto from this vantage point therefore may yield important insights into organising against strident right-wing nationalism and politics in India and internationally.

In her intense engagement with political, literary and academic publics within and outside India, Omvedt saw herself as an interlocutor, a messenger who carried forth the message of the annihilation of caste, and the vision of the dalit-bahujan revolution as the exemplar of revolution.

References

- Adloff, F. (2019, January–April). ‘Practices of conviviality and the social and political theory of convivialism’. *Conviviality Dossier*, 38(1), 35–47. <https://www.scielo.br/j/nec/a/NbV3MKBtx79NR5CKjQvxgBR/?lang=en> (accessed on 3 July 2021)
- Caillé, A. (2020). ‘The convivialist manifesto: A new political ideology. An interview with Alain Caillé’. *Global Dialogue*, 11, 2. <https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/the-convivialist-manifesto-a-new-political-ideology-an-interview-with-alain-caille/> (accessed on 7 October 2021).
- Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2016). *Intersectionality*. Polity Press.
- Convivialist International. (2020, June 16). The second convivialist manifesto: Towards a post-neoliberal world. *Civic Sociology*. <https://online.ucpress.edu/cs/article/1/1/12721/112920/THE-SECOND-CONVIVALIST-MANIFESTO-Towards-a-Post>
- Crenshaw, K. W. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43, 1241–1299.
- Foss, K. A., Foss, S. K., & Griffin, C. L. (1999). Cheris Kramarae. In *Feminist Rhetorical Theories* (pp. 33–68). Thousand Oaks & SAGE Publications.
- Gaikwad, B. N., & Patil, S. R. (2017, August). Interview with Dr. Gail Omvedt. *Writers in Conversation*, 4(2). <https://journals.flinders.edu.au/index.php/wic/article/view/22/20>
- Omvedt, G. (1975a). Caste, class and women’s liberation in India. *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 7(1) 43–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.1975.10406361>

- Omvedt, G. (1975b, November–December). Rural origins of women's liberation in India. *Social Scientist*, 4(4/5), 40–54.
- Omvedt, G. (1978). Women and rural revolt in India. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 5(3), 370–403.
- Omvedt, G. (1980). *We will smash this prison: Indian women in struggle*. Zed Books.
- Omvedt, G. (1985). The left in India. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 15(2), 172–182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472338580000111>
- Omvedt, G. (1986). 'Patriarchy': The analysis of women's oppression. *Insurgent Sociologist*, 13(3), 30–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089692058601300305>
- Omvedt, G. (1987, October 31). The creation of patriarchy. *Economic & Political Weekly*, WS 70–WS 72.
- Omvedt, G. (1988). The 'New peasant movement' in India. *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 20(2), 14–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.1988.10404445>
- Omvedt, G. (1990). *Violence against women: New movements and new theories in India*. Kali for Women.
- Omvedt, G. (1993). *Reinventing revolution: New social movements and the socialist tradition in India*. ME Sharpe Inc.
- Omvedt, G. (2003). *Buddhism in India: Challenging brahmanism and caste*. SAGE Publications.
- Omvedt, G. (2004a). *Liberty, equality, community: Dr. Ambedkar's vision for a new social order*. Fourth Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture, Jawaharlal Nehru University [Delivered in 2000]. <https://www.jnu.ac.in/sites/default/files/4th%20Dr.%20Ambedkar%20memorial%20Lecture.pdf>
- Omvedt, G. (2004b). *Jotirao Phule and the ideology of social revolution in India*. Critical Quest.
- Omvedt, G. (2005, November 19). Capitalism and globalisation, dalits and adivasis. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 40(47), 4881–4885.
- Omvedt, G. (2008a). *Seeking Begumpura: The social vision of anticaste intellectuals*. Navayana.
- Omvedt, G. (2008b). *Ambedkar: Towards an enlightened India*. Penguin Books.
- Omvedt, G. (2011). *Understanding caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and beyond*. Orient BlackSwan.
- Omvedt, G. (2014). *Dalits and the democratic revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the dalit movement in colonial India*. SAGE Publications.

Kalpana Kannabiran

*Advocate, Sociologist and Human Rights Columnist
Secunderabad, Telangana, India
kalpana.kannabiran@gmail.com*