



NewsWire

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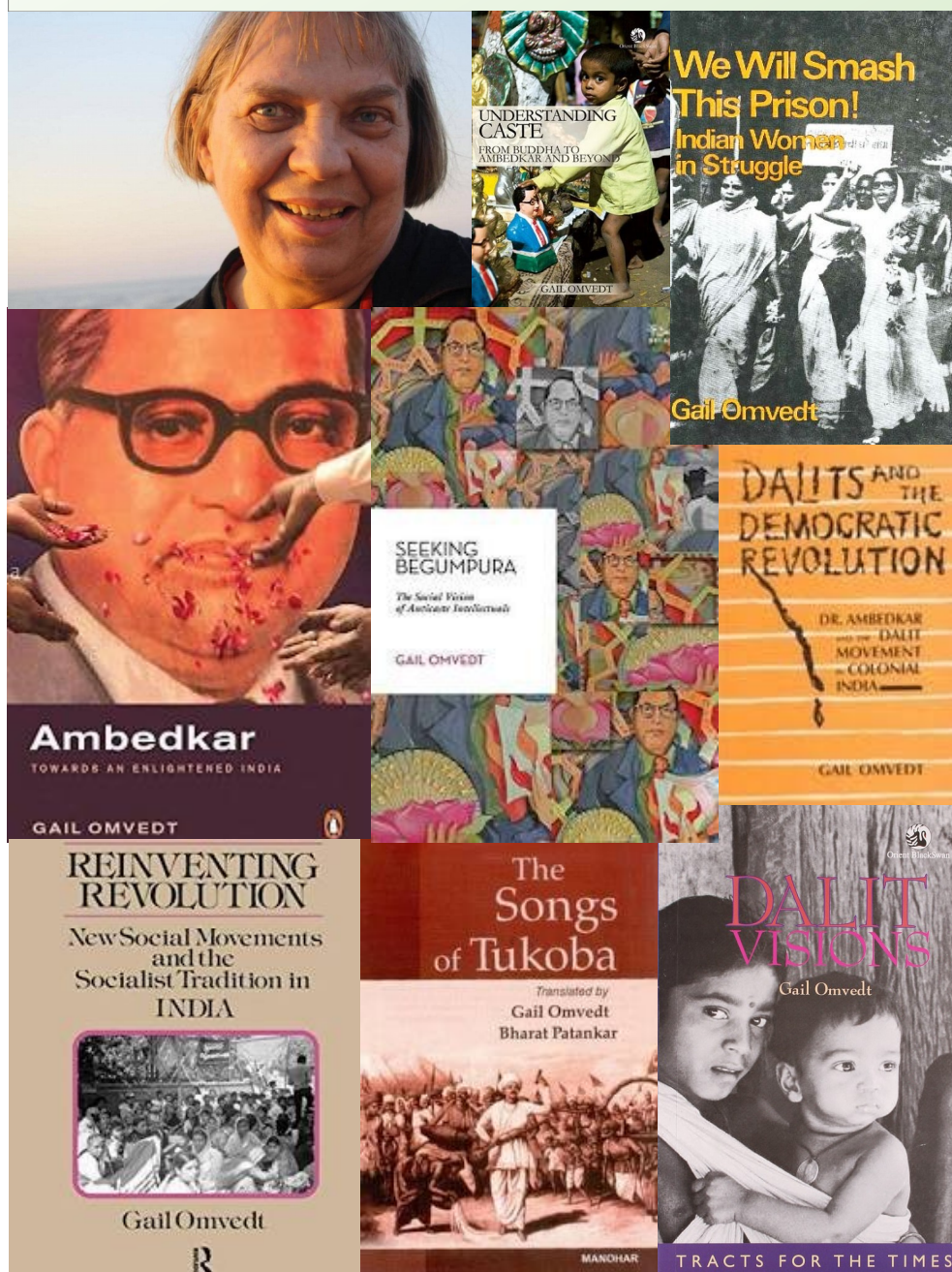
INDIA CIVIL WATCH INTERNATIONAL

Issue 10

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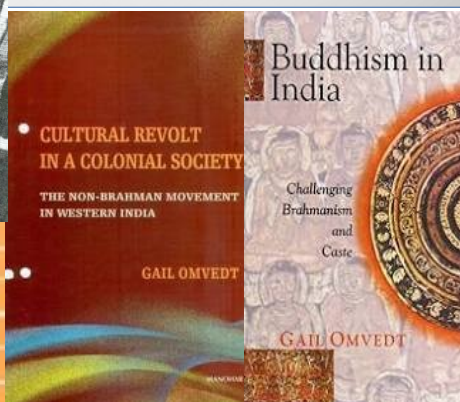
ICWI offers its deepest condolences on the occasion of the passing of Professor Gail Omvedt, one of the greatest scholars of modern India. Through her many decades of prolific and powerful scholarship, she strove to advance the democratic aspirations of millions of Dalits, women, and other oppressed peoples throughout the country. In this issue, we are reproducing a tribute to Dr. Omvedt written by V. Geetha. In future issues, we will feature more works that bring out many aspects of her vast and incisive scholarship.

Lal Salaam! Jai Bhim! Dear Professor Gail Omvedt!



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India Civil Watch International

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INDIA CIVIL WATCH
INTERNATIONAL

This Month in History

By Ratik Asokan

A “stateless psychopath.” A man of “mad ambitions.” A “barbaric criminal” who “harbored evil plans.” A “mass murderer” who spews “mumbo-jumbo to justify various atrocities.” The leader of “a new breed of savage and suicidal terrorists” who follow a “fanatical warping of Islam.” The language used by the American political establishment to describe Osama Bin Laden was Manichean and overtly religious. President George W. Bush, for one, had little doubt he was embarking on a crusade. “The battle is now on many fronts,” he said in his address to the nation on October 7, 2001, as the United States began air strikes on Al Qaeda training camps and Taliban outposts in Afghanistan. “We will not waver; we will not tire; we will not falter; and we will not fail. Peace and freedom will prevail. Thank you. May God continue to bless America.”

Tariq Ali understood early on that the War on Terror was a “clash of fundamentalisms.” Two decades on, it remains hard to tell which one was successful, or what victory might even look like. Certainly, even the most of vengeful of gods could not have wished on heathen the destruction that has been unleashed by US intervention in the Middle East. According to a report released this month by the [Costs of War](#) project at Brown University, over 900,000 lives have been lost since the WoT began. (Isn’t it curious how the American media speaks eloquently of the 3000 deaths of 9/11 while hardly mentioning the massacres and drones strikes that followed?) Regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq was supposed to usher in a democratic utopia. In fact, it has led to something like its opposite: the emergence of Islamic state, the spread of Civil War across the Levant, and genuine rise in international Jihad, from Kosovo and Croatia to Somalia and Nigeria. Domestically, too, it has hastened the slide of democracy in America, by legitimizing surveillance and authorizing the president to declare war at the smallest pretext.

Yet the great paradox of the WoT is that it was declared against a ghost enemy. Unlike nation-states, which have fixed boundaries and recognized leaders, terror groups are fluid, shapeshifting, and seldom centrally controlled. More to the point, terrorism is not a constructive political project but an act of desperation, a weapon of the weak; it emerges in the face of authoritarianism or state breakdown (or both). As such, the response to terrorism must be political, not military. It has to come through fighting poverty and supporting democratic movements, not through targeted assassination and drone strikes. This is not a plea for state-building. We know how that has gone in Afghanistan, where the US assembled a “government” out of warlords, and feigned dismay when it promptly collapsed. Nor is it some pious call for “non-intervention.” The world is already interconnected—this is one of the salient facts of the WoT—and there is no turning back the clock on American empire. What needs to be done now is to fight for a peace *with* rather than against countries in the Middle East.

It would be remiss to close this note without mentioning how the Hindu Right in India has adapted the language of the WoT. When Sanghis speak of “Islamist” terrorism in Kashmir, when they take a “tough stand” against Rohingya refugees, when they dance in triumph at the fall of Kabul, they are hoping, at least partly, to catch the attention of hawks in the western world. This is also the legacy of the WoT. It has ushered in a political episteme in which anyone, anywhere, can round up minorities (not only Muslim) in the name of national security.



Spotlight: Boston South Asian Coalition

By Rana Khan

Boston South Asian Coalition (BSAC) was formed three years ago with the goal of bringing South Asians in the greater Boston area under a progressive organizing umbrella - connecting on the ground struggles happening in the Indian subcontinent with the struggles of working-class South Asians in the diaspora.

It describes itself as “an inter-generational South Asian-led organizing collective in Wampanoag, Pawtucket, Nipmuc, and Massachusetts territories.” The coalition stands for gender and racial equity, environmental and economic justice, an end to caste and discrimination, and supporting human rights for all.

Padma, a coalition member, describes BSAC's goal “to work in solidarity with and amplify voices and actions of resistance from plunder and exploitation in South Asia, and work with our communities here against injustice, racism, and imperialism.”

BSAC has taken part in several campaigns: mobilizations against the discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of India; and speaking out against political prisoners languishing in India with false charges by a government which does not allow dissent. It also co-sponsored a rally with Boston Study Group(an Ambedkarite organization which highlights sexual violence against Dalit women).

It has held solidarity rallies for the protesting farmers in India against neoliberal corporate loot; with the people of Kashmir; and in support for the Justice for Asifa campaign. BSAC also made and circulated a video series by South Asian community members speaking for Black Lives Matter;

and has spoken up against the global vaccine apartheid.

BSAC members have conducted a series of online webinars inviting scholars and activists from South Asia when the covid pandemic halted in-person organizing. One of the webinars, commemorating the martyrdom of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdev was titled “The Farmers' Movement, Bhagat Singh, and the Indian Independence Struggle.” Another webinar on the International Women's Day highlighted women at the forefront of India's farmers' protest and their contribution. BSAC also hosted a web series on the Practices of Caste in the USA, which was led by the Ambedkar King Study Circle of California.

The organizing of South Asian diaspora communities still remains a task of a tall order with many challenges, with diasporic experiences often being split generationally and geographically, distinguishing between struggles “here” and “there”. Boston South Asian seeks to thread those struggles in the U.S. with the struggles in South Asia.

**BOSTON
SOUTH ASIAN
COALITION**

Learn more about BSAC:

<https://www.facebook.com/TheBostonCoalition/>
<https://twitter.com/TheBostonCoalition>



Protest rally at Harvard Square for the Hathras victim



Webinar poster



Solidarity with ongoing farmers' protest in India



Interfaith prayer meeting after state-sponsored violence in Delhi, India

Harsh Mander

In conversation with Rana Khan

Harsh Mander is a human rights and peace worker engaged in rehabilitation of survivors of mass violence, homeless persons, and street children. He worked formerly in the Indian Administrative Service in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh for almost two decades. Now, as the Director, Centre for Equity Studies, New Delhi, he edits the annual India Exclusion Report. A prolific author, he also regularly writes columns for Scroll, the Indian Express, and the Wire, and has written many books including Locking Down the Poor: The Pandemic and India's Moral Centre, published in December 2020.

He is also the founder of Aman Biradari, a people's campaign of a national initiative called Karwan e Mohabbat.

Could you please explain, for the benefit of our readers, your reason for leaving the civil service in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) following the Gujarat riots in 2002? What had changed for you?

I have always believed and fought for in the idea of an inclusive and egalitarian India, and in that sense, nothing had changed, I was the same person in government and after I left the IAS. I loved the years working in the IAS in some of India's poorest regions, for the betterment of the people during the 80s and 90s. I was on the training faculty for new recruits to the IAS as well, in Mussoorie, trying to help nurture the same commitment to the values of the constitution.

There are many battles I fought while in government for justice and equality. But when I heard the terrifying accounts of survivors of the Gujarat massacre in 2002, I worried deeply about where our country was headed, and I realized that there are many battles I could fight with the power of the state, as a government. But the battle to defend India as a secular and humane democracy I needed to fight as an independent citizen, outside the state. There had been a long history of communal massacres in which minorities have suffered grievously -the Nellie massacre of 1983, the anti-Sikh riots in 1984, Bhagalpur in 1989, Bombay in 1992-93. But when I went to Gujarat in my individual capacity to help in the relief camps and heard the horrendous first-person accounts, it became clear to me that this state-sponsored attack was the climax so far of this history of human massacres. We could not allow our country to slip into a regime of hate, targeted violence and fear.

I wrote an essay ([Cry, the Beloved Country](#)) at that time which expressed my anguish, and it went all over the world, and published in a prominent Indian newspaper too at that time. In writing it, I had crossed over irrevocably from state power to civil society resistance, and I put in my papers for voluntary retirement so that I could put in all my efforts towards fighting to defend the idea of a



humane and inclusive India. My first task was healing, justice and rehabilitation of the victims and survivors of the riots.

You co-launched Karwan-e-Mohabbat (Caravan of Love) in 2017. Would you say that with the current situation being what it is, we need such caravans all across India today?

We need these all over the world actually!

Since 2017, there has been a steep rise in mob lynching, with the overwhelming majority of victims being Muslims. There has been a frightening silence from the majority community, these acts have been accepted without resistance, some even applauded. In my op-ed, I had made a call for Karwan -e Mohabbat, the idea being to go as we would as family members to the homes of the persons lynched, not as human right workers or journalists.

We'd tell families of the victims that they weren't alone as we shared their pain, that we requested their forgiveness for what we have become as country, we would stand with them in their battle for justice, and that we would tell their story, we would not let them be forgotten.

Our first Caravan of Love started in Assam in

September 2017 where we met a family that had lost two young boys to lynching; we travelled through many states – Jharkhand, UP, Gujarat, Karnataka, stopping also to meet the 1984 riot widows living in Tilak Vihar, Delhi. Then we culminated in Porbandar, Gandhiji's city of birth. We were a diverse group of writers, human right workers, students, and filmmakers.

We found that our travels meant so much to the survivors of hate, we decided to continue our journeys every month. To date, we have made some 30 journeys in 14 states, meeting over 100 families. We try to help with legal cases; raise funds for pensions for widows and help with children's studies. The CAA protests, Delhi riots and then the pandemic lockdown meant that we had to pause these journeys to respond to new crises. We have given 10 million packaged meals to workers stranded and rendered jobless during the lockdown.

We are now trying to regroup as pandemic restrictions lessen in the country and we see more cases of violence and lynching spreading across the country.

You must have visited many families, and heard numerous accounts, during the course of Karwane-Mohabbat's journeys across India. What disturbs you the most about the damage done to the secular fabric of the country?

These journeys were harrowing. Four things stood out in all the narratives. One, the sheer cruelty of the violence and the hatred unleashed is terrifying (for instance, a family member of a victim said that it was better if the person had been shot dead instead of having his eye gouged out while still alive). Two, the performative nature of these acts of violence: in almost all cases, these were videotaped by the perpetrators, and then circulated on WhatsApp, instilling fear amongst the minorities. Three, the role of police: if present, they were mute spectators, and if they arrived later to the scene, they criminalized the victims themselves. Lastly, the role of the majority community. We always asked the families of victims if anyone came forward to help and the answer was that none did.

The idea of India, the India in which you and I grew up, is threatened like never before. Do you think the country has reached a point of no return already as regards its secular character, or is there hope yet?

The central battle is regarding the idea of India itself. About a hundred years ago, Gandhi started work in the country that we would ultimately build,

with Muslims rights, and for which he ultimately paid with his life. But on the other hand the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS had a different idea of India. My family had suffered, like so many others, at Partition (we were originally from Rawalpindi). At that time, it must have been tempting to have a Hindu India versus a Muslim Pakistan, but we had leaders like Gandhi, Nehru, Ambedkar, and Maulana Azad who had a different vision for India.

Now all the highest constitutional posts in India are being held by people who have been members of the RSS most of their adult lives. The RSS never accepted India's secular constitution, promising equal citizenship to India's Muslims. Ironically, the BJP-RSS combine seem bent on proving Jinnah right in his assertion that Muslims would not be safe in a Hindu-majority India. We are now fighting for the defense of the Constitution itself.

As regards your question, I would say that we are fast approaching a point of no return, but we are not there yet. Yes, there has been a significant radicalization of Hindus, the opposition hasn't unified politically, and the first-past-the-post system gives the illusion of majority support to Hindutva. But the protests against the citizenship laws showed us that a substantial number of people also do have faith in diversity and unity of the country.

The term 'liberal' has become a much-abused term in India. It seems to have become a pattern for activists and human rights workers like you to being persecuted on those grounds alone?

Who is a liberal in India? One who believes in defending India against the attacks on its constitution. We should not allow those of us who choose to speak up for justice and fraternity to be stigmatized, nor should we get defensive about being a liberal.

After the Delhi violence in 2020, we had petitioned Delhi courts over the hate speech of Kapil Mishra and others, but then the police actually filed affidavits in the High Court and Supreme Court accusing me of hate speech! The strategy is to term activists like us as Urban Maoists and Naxals, and charge them with the terror laws, make an example of them, especially the younger ones, to instill fear of retribution in the general population. Those of us who can't be put in jails are being hounded via charges of economic offences and income tax raids.

Karwan-e-Mohabbat website:

<https://karwanemohabbat.in/>

Film Gallery:

<https://karwanemohabbat.in/film-gallery/>


The Pegasus story, with implications of the Indian state involvement in spying over its citizens, initially created a stir but seems to have petered out. What, in your opinion, might be reasons for this?

The lack of popular outrage is an abiding mystery to me. The same thing has happened with many other issues: the devastation this April and May, when there was a state-made oxygen shortage, state apathy and almost pathological lack of compassion for those battling with Covid; the migrant crisis last summer; the questionable Rafale purchases; the misuse of the UAPA laws to jail dissenters. There could be two reasons for this lack of outrage. One is the politics of hate, that as long as the government is seen to be working well against the perceived "enemy within," the Indian Muslim, people do not seem to mind the state of the economy, the corruption, even hunger, joblessness and the death of loved ones. The other is the historic low expectations from the state -- people might feel that as long as the state leaves them alone things are alright.

There is a large Indian diaspora, especially here in North America. What are your expectations from it, and from organizations like the ICWI in efforts towards a more inclusive India?

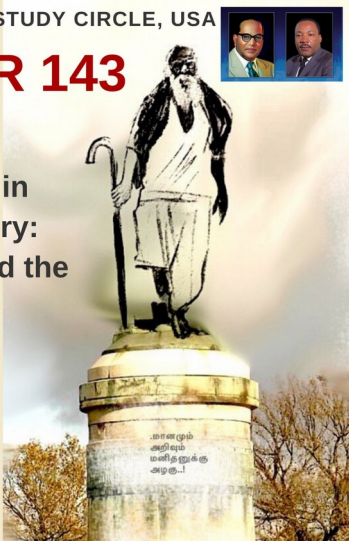
There is lots of evidence that the Hindutva supremacy identity is being propagated widely within and by the Indian diaspora, with those in the IT industry most vulnerable to this ideology of bigotry. There is this Stop Funding Hate organization that tracks funding to RSS-affiliated organizations in the US. I feel that the NRI community is influential, and sadly quite a few use their resources to popularize and legitimize the Hindutva identity. Then there are also those who are trying to uphold the Indian constitution and all that it stands for. To those, and to organizations like ICWI, I would say that please try to win the hearts and minds of the young Indians abroad, to work towards the idea of a more diverse and a more equal world. The vaccine inequality has shown up the divisions and has demonstrated that no one is safe until everyone is safe. We need to impress upon overseas Indian a larger conviction of this idea of fraternity, justice, equality and of inclusivity.

AMBEDKAR KING STUDY CIRCLE, USA



K.RADHAKRISHNAN
Minister for Devaswom
(Hindu Temple Trusts),
Welfare of SC/ST/OBC,
Parliamentary Affairs of
Government of Kerala

PERIYAR 143
Birthday
Social Justice in
the 21st Century:
Challenges and the
Way Forward



Friday, SEP 17 @
6:30PM USA PDT
(Sat Sep 18th | 7AM India)
ZOOM:
Join: bit.ly/AKSCMeet
Meeting ID: 854 7466 5329

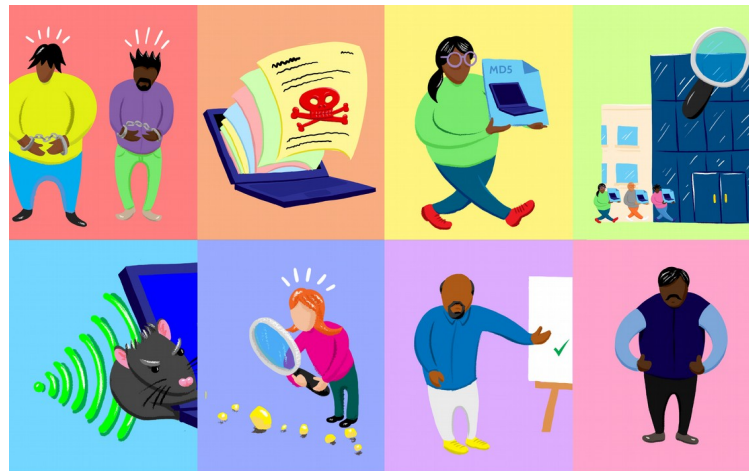
Contact Ambedkar King Study Circle
[Web](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook Page](#) |
[Facebook Group](#) | [YouTube](#)

***143rd Birth Anniversary of Periyar*.**
Social Justice in the 21st Century: Challenges and Way Forward, *Com. K. Radhakrishnan, Minister, Kerala*.
<https://twitter.com/akscsfba/status/1437116352662102020>
Friday, Sep 17, 6:30 PM PST (9:30 PM EST)
<http://bit.ly/AKSCMeet>
India Time: Saturday, Sep 18, 7:00 AM
Capitalism has reduced the human beings as *wage laborers* whereas the wage is determined by the *professional skills* and the professional skills by the level of *education & training* and the level of education & training by the *social and the economical position* and social position determined by *caste*, the social capital, and the caste determined by birth. This social capital has manifested 'the pseudo equal opportunity' to access the job market or the capital as a fact in capitalism.
Socially underprivileged have to put in more effort and confront many challenges than the socially privileged to secure a livelihood and achieve dignified life under capitalism. Even after various social justice measures have been introduced many areas are still out of their reach.
Unmindful privatization of education and the industrial sector have reversed the measure of social justice and become a major challenge in the 21st century. What is the way forward?



DISMANTLING GLOBAL HINDUTVA MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

Just concluded, a conference that brought together a range of scholars presenting ideas from many different perspectives towards contending with, and dismantling the global scourge of Hindutva. ICWI was proud to support the efforts of the organizers and participants of this pioneering effort to shatter the silences enabling the growth of the Hindu supremacist movement across the world. Please check out the website <https://dismantlinghindutva.com/> and stay tuned for updates on recordings of panels, as well as future events, resources and initiatives! A hearty congratulations to all the organizers, participants and audience members who made this effort a success!



Arrests Made Over Evidence Planted By Hackers

August 2021
By NET ALERT

BHIMA KOREGAON CASE: NEW CARTOON RELEASED BY NETALERT!!!

Available in [Français](#) | [বাংলা](#) | [मराठी](#) | [తెలుగు](#) | [हिन्दी](#) | [اُردُو](#) | [ગુજરાતી](#)

The cartoon (next page) was published in multiple languages by [NETALERT](#).* It explains why the findings of a digital forensics investigation conducted by [Arsenal Consulting](#), into the hard drives of individuals imprisoned by the Indian government in the **Bhima Koregaon case**. The cartoon provides important evidence of the use of malware to implicate, imprison and silence human rights activists.

Please sign our petition to the [Parliamentary Subcommittee on Information Technology](#) calling for an immediate investigation into the questions raised by the investigation into the Netwire attack identified and documented by Arsenal Consulting. Arsenal's multiple investigative reports that have since been corroborated by many Indian and international computer security experts.

* NETALERT is a project that uses a range of approaches such as story-telling, summaries of research findings, and technical explainers to help make research about risks online accessible to wider audiences.

THE BHIMA KOREGAON CASE



Between 2018 and 2020, sixteen activists, academics, lawyers and poets were arrested in India after authorities discovered incriminating documents on their laptops.



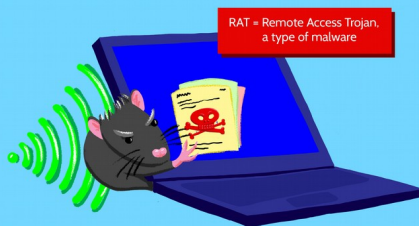
These documents called for violence and included an exchange about firearms with the banned Maoist party.



But defense lawyers helping those arrested begged to differ. They gathered up those laptops with incriminating evidence...



And sent it to Arsenal, a digital forensics firm in the US, for a second opinion.

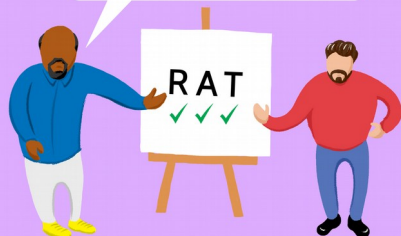


They found evidence that RATs had secretly slipped those documents into the laptops over the internet.



Luckily for the forensics team, the RAT left a trail of crumbs in its wake.

...these files were fabricated and planted on Mr. Wilson's computer.



Professor Sandeep Shukla,
IIT Kanpur

Professor Jedidiah Crandall,
Arizona State University

Other experts agree with Arsenal's findings, which were first published in February of 2021.

Our investigation is complete.



Yet the National Investigation Agency disagrees. They maintain that they see no evidence of hacking.



So the activists remain in jail, awaiting trial, while the RAT hackers are still on the loose.

ACTION 1 Please share the cartoon widely (available in multiple languages)!

<https://netalert.me/bhima-koregaon.html>

ACTION 2 Please sign and share the petition:

<https://indiacivilwatch.org/2021/09/02/netalert-arrests-made-over-evidence-planted-by-hackers/>

Land, caste, class and gender - Gail Omvedt's writings were united in their vision of utopia

By V. Geetha

When she first came to India in 1963 to stay for a year, Gail Omvedt was 22 years old. Earlier, she had been a student at Carleton College, where that other great scholar of anti-caste movements, Eleanor Zelliot, was teaching. Her journey east presaged other such crossings, notably by seekers of various kinds, including musicians and music lovers.

For her part, she returned to university and enrolled for graduate study at the University of California at Berkeley, and did not come back to India until 1971 to begin work on her dissertation on the Non-Brahman Movement in that part of the country. This would go on to become a pioneering study in English, of Mahatma Phule and his movement: *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India, 1873-1930*.

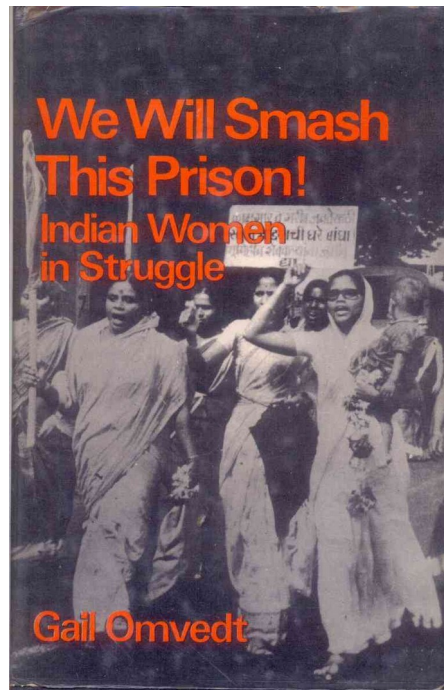
Terrain worth exploring

But Omvedt did not only work at her research. The tumultuous politics of the times engrossed her attention and soon she found herself attending meetings held by trade unions, new Left formations and anti-caste groups in Maharashtra.

Having come of political age in the United States of the 1960s, she turned her attention to the most important contradictions that marked the social order in India: of caste and gender. And as she grappled with these divisions she realised that existing frameworks of analysis, Marxist or feminist, as she had known them, were not adequate - to unravel the conundrum of inequality exemplified in the caste order, or indeed to the bewildering and complex operations of patriarchy in the

Indian context.

In a note that she wrote to the Canadian feminist zine, *Off Our Backs* in 1985, she observed that the inadequacy of Left theorising was being increasingly felt in India, and not only in feminist circles but also amongst those engaged in people's science and health movements, in environmental circles and those fighting religious chauvinism and casteism. As to what feminism could offer, [she conceded](#), was not clear either, but it was a terrain worth exploring.



And explore she did, spending time with women's groups and movements, thinking along with others, fellow feminists, trade unionists, women labourers, domestic workers, students... and this exploration is writ large in her 1979-'80 publication, *We shall Smash this Prison: Indian Women in Struggle*.

Meanwhile, she raised a plethora of questions, impelled by the feminist politics that came to be, from the late

1970s, and was focused on women's sexual subordination, in the family and elsewhere. Women were sexually exploited and culturally oppressed, but not always in the same way. Lower caste, Dalit and working-class women were subject to what she termed "social patriarchy", while women from the upper castes were subject to the punitive ethics of the family ([see](#) her remarkable *Violence against Women: New Movements and New Theories in India*, published in 1990).

She looked to the writings of the historian [Sharad Patil](#) to understand the making of a social structure that was shaped by caste hierarchies on the one hand, and conjugal and familial arrangements, on the other.

It was not that she agreed with him entirely, but his *Dasa-Shudra Slavery* opened up ways of thinking about family and caste, and as important to her, suggested how one might rework Engels' theory of the origin of family, private property and the state.

Meanwhile, she remained a purveyor of anti-caste politics in the present, even as she wrote of its pasts, of Phule and Shahu Maharaj, and subsequently of Ambedkar: and called attention to the various ways in which it had come to permeate popular struggles, whether of the Bahujan Samaj Party, or the Bahujan Mahasangh, or of peasant organising.

This latter came to absorb her attention in the late 1980s and thereafter, when, along with her husband, Bharat Patankar, she was drawn to peasant protests. Sharad Joshi's Shetkari Sanghatna appeared to her an interesting experiment in viable

agrarian populism, and she was particularly admiring of how it mobilised women to its ranks and the manner in which the organisation addressed women's claims on land and their assertion of equality and dignity, within the home and the community.

She was watchful too of [environmental struggles](#), but while she was taken with their logic, could not always abide by their reasoning. In the 1980s, along with many others, including her mother-in-law, Indutai Patankar, she co-founded the [Shramik Mukti Dal](#), a toilers' movement, which sought to address issues to do with drought, water use and the shrinking of the commons, on account of various development projects, including dams and power projects.

The practical work undertaken under the aegis of the movement, and the example set by other such efforts, supported by non-conventional Left groups, such as the [Lal Nishan Party](#), led her to theorise issues to do with development, science and progress in two ways: in the circumstances given to the populace, and how they might work with these, without conceding the justness of their demands – and also with regard to the greater common good that looked to the interests of small producers, the working poor and women, especially the most marginal amongst the latter, single, deserted and widowed individuals.

Peasant struggle writings

Through the 1980s and even after, she kept up with writings on peasant struggles, concerns and resistance: the pages of the *Economic and Political Weekly* and the *Journal of Peasant Studies* bear witness to her incessant commitment to justice for agrarian India. And here, she had to confront, parley with and fight back arguments that

challenged her own: from Marxist theorists, fellow sociologists and other equally keen watchers of the Indian agrarian scene, such as the late K Balagopal.

The 1990s saw Omvedt look to a different sort of scholarship: while she continued to be interested in people's movements, the lives of women and matters to do with the environment, the stubborn casteism of India's elites, on full display during the Mandal-Masjid years, led her to focus on all matters that she had hitherto been concerned with, from the point of view of social justice.

Whether economic growth and distributive justice, democracy and freedom, sexual equality and emancipation from patriarchy: these were to be realised in and through measures that brought material relief, social uplift and cultural freedom to the Bahujan-Dalits of India. Her scholarship too came to be focused on these matters: [Dalit Visions: the Anti-caste movement and Indian Cultural Identity](#), [Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and The Dalit Movement in Colonial India](#) and [Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India](#) were all products of these years.

An interesting transitional volume in this regard was [Reinventing Revolution: New Social Movements](#), which signalled perhaps for the last time, her desire to retain dialogic engagement with the Left and various people's movements.

But given that such dialogues as she envisaged, especially with the Left and with feminists, did not quite unfold in the manner she imagined they would, she crossed this

threshold to move on to another way of political being and writing.

This period also saw her writing in the popular press – the lively column she wrote for *The Hindu* in the late 1990s featured many valuable and at times contentious observations about faith, caste, social habit, belief and Hindu philosophy.

Meanwhile, she honed this manner of writing, creating, as she remarked, a hybrid genre that combined “expert scholarship” and “activist journalism” and which found its fulsome expression in two volumes, both published in the new millennium: [Buddhism: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste](#)

and the fervently written, [Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anticaste Intellectuals](#).

She also created a blog by the same name and kept it active until a few years ago. Subsequently, she wrote a pedagogic book, on caste through history, and her last work appears to have been translations of Tukaram.

Anti-caste assertion

Omvedt wrote and thought in context: her writing was situated and addressed particular realities. But she ensured that the present, whatever moment it was that she was addressing, was not folded into itself. She placed it in time's unfolding, looking beyond and after: a fine instance of this manner of expounding the moment is to be had in an essay that examines the reasons for the Bahujan Samaj Party wanting to name the University of Kolhapur after Shahu Maharaj.



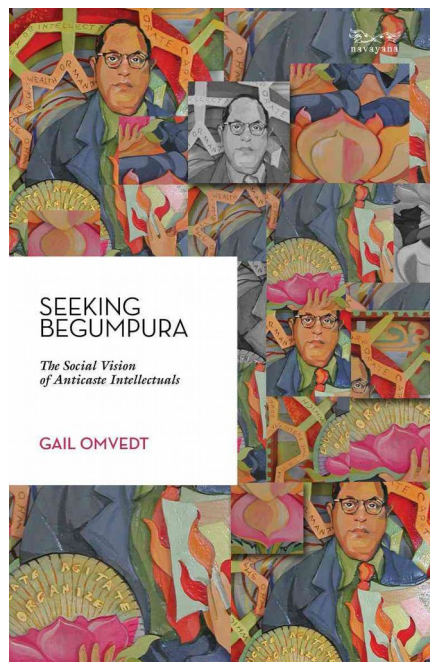
But rather than only focus on the politics of the hour, she uses the occasion to dwell on Shahu and his historical role (*Economic and Political Weekly*, August 13, 1994). Or consider her early essay on Maratha assertion in the 1980s: she takes us through the making of Maratha identity, and pulls in developments from the 19th century into her story, differentiates between identity markers in the past and present, points to the way such assertion looked to align with or keep away Dalits... and through his remarkable sociological and historical journey she folds the present into an ongoing dialectic of caste and secularity (*Economic and Political Weekly*, February 6, 1982).

Her studies of Phule and his times, the non-brahmans in Bombay union politics, the relationship between Communists, nationalists and the Non Brahman Movement are very valuable for what they tell us about the emergence of a distinctive third sort of politics in late colonial India.

As much as nationalism and communism, the anti-caste assertion was a response to the times, and its adherents straddled several political traditions, seeking to align them along the plane of a common justice. Omvedt might be said to have rendered anti-casteism a formidable political and cultural tradition of dissent, and one that had its own vision for the India to be.

That meant that it could not be viewed only in terms of its relationship to colonialism: rather it had to be understood as offering a substantive critique of the internal logic of Indian society and by that token, pushing at the boundaries of words such as "freedom" and "equality".

These words, Omvedt's work makes clear, have to be



understood in more expansive ways. Political liberty did not translate automatically into social emancipation: this latter had to be fought for and won on the terrain of the nation-to-be. Likewise, equality could not be construed only in terms of what was being denied to subject peoples: it was to be realised by the subject peoples in their relationship to each other as well.

Views on Communism

Perhaps Omvedt's most contentious writings have to do with the land, caste, class and gender questions: and while her gender politics is less contested, her arguments on India's agrarian worlds have elicited sharp commentary and critique, chiefly from the Left. However, in order to understand her theorising of peasant worlds, as also her Marxism, as these were expressed in the 1980s, we need to also locate her in context: she examined Indian arguments within the broader context of an evolving Asian Socialism.

The contours of this latter had been sketched in briefly in independent Left circles in the United States in the 1960s, and

amongst the many who argued for various sorts of socialisms was the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars. This comprised a group of academics who came together to set themselves against US policy in Asia that was clearly anti-communist and which viewed Asian Studies as a discipline that ought to aid its cold war objectives.

These men and women eventually came to be found in the late 1960s, the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*. Omvedt wrote for the *Bulletin* from the early 1970s, and well into the 1990s, and her views on Communism were shaped by the comparative histories of the present that its pages presented.

Developments in China, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines pointed to the need to revalue socialist arguments that had emerged in European and Russian contexts, and Omvedt saw her own work as doing this for India. She made it clear that the view from the field cannot be adduced from theoretical claims or indeed from tidy socialist concepts.

And it was precisely on this score that she entered into lively debates with the Indian Left: that the actual details of the geography that they were concerned with ought to be heeded before any large theoretical claim could be made, about class attitudes or about exploitation (See her review essay, "Marxism and the Analysis of South Asia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 4:4, 1974).

This was evident not only in her essays on Maharashtra's agrarian worlds but also in other terrains where Left intellectuals held on to broad conceptual arguments, without quite heeding the specificity of developments on the ground. Omvedt took critical measure of such an oversight, when she took on Amalendu Guha's views on the Assam

agitation (*Economic and Political Weekly*, March 28, 1981).

And by the same token, she sought to underscore the limits of Left reasoning in the Sri Lankan context, in a short but densely argued essay on the Tamil problem. The right to self-determination, she noted, cannot be reduced to class politics merely, but had to be adduced in its relation to the totality that it sought to criticise and hold accountable (*Economic and Political Weekly*, October 23, 1982).

Her writings on peasant movements have been criticised and lauded: and in view of the current farmers' agitations, her exchanges with Balagopal in *Economic and Political Weekly* acquire significance: Balagopal did not take kindly to her view of the peasant movement as capable of speaking for, and representing all those who made up the agrarian community.

Agricultural labourers, he held, could not be spoken for thus. And neither did he think that the caste divisions with agrarian society could be subsumed easily with the putative notion of a "Bharat" that was yet different from "India". He did not also imagine that the peasantry might be viewed as such, and pointed to how it was stratified along class and caste lines (*Economic and Political Weekly*, September 10, 1988). Omvedt's reasoning drew on arguments that partially, at least, have been made in the context of other peasant struggles, particularly by Swami Sahajanand and others in the 1940s.

But she also sought to make a case for the peasant producer in himself, as a deserving agency and right to mediate his world without interference from a domineering and elitist state and enter into a social market on his own terms. And this proved a difficult argument to sustain,

given the nature of the market – as Jairus Banaji (*Journal of Peasant Studies*, Volume 17) and Paresh Chattopadhyay (*Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Volume 27) pointed out.

Yet the questions she raised, of the elitist state, its casteist biases, and the parasitic plundering of agrarian resources, have remained with us. In addition, her clear-eyed sense of what land means to women, and the value of their labour are matters that have not been sufficiently addressed by the Left (See *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 29).

Also, it must be said that her view of the peasant universe was nuanced: her reviews of the published literature on agrarian issues in Tamil Nadu and Bihar are testimony to how closely she followed developments in these regions.

In this context, we need to acknowledge how her work features aspects of feminist political-economic thought, and here she shared common ground with others of her time, particularly Maria Mies and Bina Agarwal.

Feminist political economy in the Indian context needs to be valued for its unique insights, and this is something that we have been made aware of, this last decade, in and through Ranjana Padhi's work on the widowed farmers of the Punjab, *Those Who did not Die* and Dolly Kikon's *Living with Oil*.

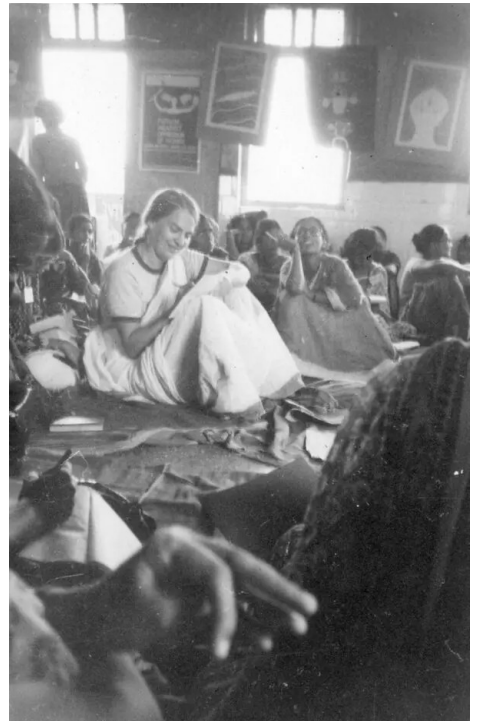
Journey in politics

Gail Omvedt's journey in politics and thought was undertaken in and through several historical conjunctures, but she retained aspects of all her stopovers: in her view, these various sites of sojourn, whether feminist, Marxist, Phule-Ambedkarism, were united in their vision of utopia:

a world that ought to be rendered real, in times to come, but for which one needs to labour in the present.

While reason and analysis were central to divining the nature of this world-to-be, it yet had to be desired, longed for and in this passionate wanting, lay the potential for political comradeship. And this is where the struggle against caste and patriarchy came together: for it was in the remaking of caste and gendered selves that the promise of utopia stood to be redeemed.

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Rest In Power Dr. Gail Omvedt!
(Aug 2nd 1941 – Aug 25th, 2021)



"Their love for each other only
deepened with the passage of
time, and through the
movements they have led"
- Prachi Patankar (daughter).



‘Blackout’ (September 1965): A Poem On A War Outside and A War Within.

Salman Kureishy

The poetry of Faiz has been consumed in several flavours - mostly of the romantic or revolutionary variety. Much against and beyond the traditional interpretations, Aamir Mufti also reads him as a poet struggling with questions of [identity, culture, and Partition](#). By Partition, Aamir means not just the events of 1947 but also an acute sense of being a divided self, a feeling of isolation.

Faiz in his lyric poems repeatedly raises the anguished sigh of a lover seeking an almost impossible union with the absent beloved. Aamir looks at this lover as a figure yearning to belong and to become whole; the quintessential figure of the “terrified”, and “terrifying” minority in modern, secular and often majoritarian nation states. The parallels with the ‘Jewish Question’ in Europe make Mufti’s book, and several of Faiz poems, appear in startlingly new light.

Take for instance his poem “[Blackout](#)”(links to the original, in Roman, Urdu and Devanagari scripts). This poem has traditionally been labelled simplistically as an “Anti-War” poem, written as it was when India and Pakistan went to the first full-fledged war in September 1965. A closer reading reveals a complex weaving together of the themes outlined above. My translation below builds on the excellent previous versions by V.G. Kiernan, Daud Kamal and Aamir.

Blackout (September 1965)

*Since the lamps have been without light (1)
I am seeking, moving about, in the dust: I do not know where
Both my eyes have been lost;
You who are knowledgeable, give me some sign of myself.
It is as if into every vein has descended,
Wave upon wave of a murderous river of some poison, (6)
Carrying longing for you, memory of you, my love;
I don’t know where, in what wave, my heart is wallowing?
Wait one moment, till from some world beyond
Lightning comes towards me, like the miraculous bright hand of Moses. (10)
And restores luminous glow, to the lost pearls of my eyes,
Now drunk with the cup of darkness.
Wait one moment till somewhere the breadth of the river is found,
And my heart, (15)
Having been washed in poison and annihilated, is renewed, and finds some landing-place
Then I shall bring my new sight and heart, by way of offering,
Then I shall sing the praise of beauty and write on the theme of love.*



The subject of the poem feels lost, refuses to self-identify by any known category - religion, race or nation. The first few lines speak of the pain of a lover who is yearning for union, carrying memory of a love that once was. Then follow images and a vocabulary that defy the space of separation of the two nation-states. In his inimitable way, Faiz blends the personal with the cultural and the political; the memory of the beloved (ja’n) becomes the yearning for healing the divide, the search for a shared cultural space (line 7, 8).

The redemption comes from across the horizon, the “world beyond”, now artificially been made foreign. The quintessentially Quranic imagery of Moses’s hand bringing light, and Islamic (fana’) is mixed with the Hindu symbolism of sacredness. Aamir observes:

...that Faiz uses reaching a gha’t (river bank) as an image of restoration and healing is not insignificant. It is an Indic (rather than Persio-Arabic) word and image, with a clear reference both to the Hindu sacralization of bathing in river waters as a means to purification and to the ritual cremation of the dead (p. 228).

At a time when the two newly independent nation-states were at war, Faiz made no attempt to chose sides, or identify his home/country (*vatan*) or nation (*qaum*). He was too busy with the war within. A poet is essentially a homeless person.