



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



## An Interview with Dr Gail Omvedt

B.N. Gaikwad and Sumeet R. Patil

*Dr Gail Omvedt is an American-born scholar, who has obtained her Ph.D. from the University of California Berkeley in 1973. Dr. Omvedt has devoted her life to Dr Ambedkar's anti-caste movement, Shramik Mukti Dal, Stri Mukti Sangharsh Chalval, the women's movement and social work since becoming a citizen of India in 1983. She has also authored several books and published, which helps people associated with Dalit literature and Movement.*

*This interview was conducted during the visit of Dr Omvedt and Dr Bharat Patankar to Vidyanagri, Kalina Campus, Santacruz, Mumbai University on 14 March 2016. Both were extremely cooperative during the interview and answered the questions with patience. Sincere thanks to both of them.*

Q. Ma'am, you have been actively engaged in the Anti-caste movement since the 1980s. How has your journey been?

A. Well I was involved in the Black Movement in the US and so I was sympathetic towards Dalit Movements and Dalit issues, and reading about Dr Ambedkar, I got attracted towards his thoughts and work.

Q. So regarding African-American literature and Dalit literature, you find resemblances between them. How have these caste issues in India attracted your attention?

A. Well coming to India it is an obvious issue and you have to sort of close your eyes to ignore it. I didn't want to do that, not with my background. So I became interested in it and started writing about the caste issue and speaking about it.

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Q. How did you get attracted towards Dr B.R. Ambedkar's literature?

A. It has been an obvious influence on my thinking and it influenced my sympathies for Dalits and their problems. Secondly, it is because he was the only person after Mahatma Phule who systematically analysed the caste system and did a critique of it. There is no comparison to his contribution even in the academic field.

Q. How do you analyse contemporary Dalit politics in India in general and Maharashtra in particular?

A. Well I am not sure there is much going on in Dalit Politics aside from issues about atrocities, betrayals by the leadership and their quest for political power. I don't know what else is going on. But one can definitely say that contemporary Dalit politics is bogged down into politics of Dalit vote bank and it doesn't even touch Dalits leading other oppressed sections of society towards a liberatory movement.

Q. Your husband, Dr Patankar Sir, has been working on Dalit politics since late 1960s. It was a very highly politically charged atmosphere, but what Dr Ambedkar envisaged about Dalit politics and the Republican Party is not getting fulfilled. All this doesn't seem to be reaching out and completing the goal that Dr Ambedkar has visualized with. Do you see any possibilities that Dalit movement gaining that momentum once again?

A. Well, it could and almost can, only if people take interest in and make a resolution to do something. Dalits should lead other oppressed sections. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar founded the Independent Labor Party and initiated the Republican Party before his death because he did not want to have a party representing only sectoral interests of the Dalits. He was of the opinion that if Dalits want to liberate themselves from all shackles they have to change the system and annihilate both caste and capitalism. This would happen only if they bring together all the oppressed sections, exploited castes, women, and exploited classes.

Q. We owe you so much for your service to India in many ways, like your association with rural women, Shramik Mukti Dal (SMD), Stri Mukti Sangarsh, Chalval women's struggles in India. What inspired *you* to do such great social work?

A. I first became a part of Shramik Mukti Dal and their perspective on women was going ahead of any other left party. They say that even if we achieve classless and casteless society women would remain exploited so all the three liberatory aspects should go together for the overall liberation of humanity. Shramik Mukti Dal was initiator of deserted women's movement and contributed to it to a large extent. I also got involved with 'Shetkari Sanghatna Mahila Aghadi' as you may know and that was also a big inspiration to me at that time mainly because their perspective on 'Laxmi Mukti' andolan-'*protest*' took a strong stand on putting property in the name of both husband and wife.

Q. Do you think Dalit Autobiographies are the kaleidoscopic of Dalit reality in past and present? If so which Dalit autobiographies did you enjoy the most?

A. I don't know which one I enjoyed the most. But Baburao Bagul, Narayan Surve, Namdev Dhasal are pioneering literary figures in Dalit literature. In some sense all kinds of Dalit literature, poetry or otherwise, have autobiographical aspects, but autobiographies like *Baluta* of Daya Pawar are purely autobiography. By and large Dalit writers has to go beyond the sectional identities and experiences and try to write a literature connecting the experiences as a part of the overall experience of today's social life.

Q. Recently, Marathi Bhasha Din – 'Marathi Language Day' was celebrated on 27 February. Vi. Va. Shirwadkar's Birth anniversary is celebrated as the Marathi Bhasha Din as a tribute to his contribution to Marathi language. Some organisations and readers on social media claimed that Annabhau Sathe whose literature was translated in 27 world languages has really popularized Marathi language hence Marathi Bhasha Din should be celebrated on 1 August, Annabhau's birth anniversary. What's your take on this?

A. Well I think Annabhau Sathe has been neglected because he has been stamped as Dalit and as a Matang and he is been ignored, but his literature was very great. It had the standard of world literature and always went beyond any sectional interests and experiences. I think it would be a good idea to celebrate Marathi Bhasha Din on 1 August: with Annabhau's birth anniversary.

Q. You have been a scholar with deeper understanding of both the African American and Dalit socio-political situation and USA government's reformative policies. How do you compare the success of US government's affirmative policies and the Reservation policy for Dalits in India?

A. Reservation policy is more rigid and more definitive than affirmative action, which is loose. I don't know which one has been more successful.

I think Reservation policy has been quite successful in its own way. It has helped lots of Dalits to come forward who wouldn't have had opportunities otherwise. Of course it is only a temporary relief measure and the task of liberating Dalits from slavery is still a great issue before us.

Q. There has been a debate that it is a time to do away with reservation policy. What are your views on it?

A. Well if 'Caste' had been done away with then absolutely reservation would be unnecessary. But as we know that the society is far from that situation. So reservations should continue to the time of caste annihilation.

Q. Dalit and Caste system and anti-caste movements. What are your future plans regarding this?

A. Well I'm not sure, I don't have any future plans for the movement; I just watch them and participate a little bit but I don't really make policy. We as SMD are part of the Samajik Atyacar Pratibandhak Calwal and Jati Mukti Andolan. In fact SMD initiated these. We are successful in bringing Marxists and Phule-Shahu-Ambedkarite organisations and parties into this forum. There are whole lot of things that need to be addressed such as 'Inter-Caste Marriages', and necessary moving ahead in education, changing the mode and relations of production which are based on graded hierarchy of caste. All of these things should be considered.

Q. What changes you have noticed over the last three to four decades in women's movements?

A. I think that women are starting to come forward now and becoming more concerned about their rights.

Q. What are your views on the incidents happening on Indian university campuses?

A. I think students are in the forefront of demanding rights and demanding changes in society, making it more egalitarian and facilitating liberative processes. This is still going on and we see many interventions, counter action and struggle of students in JNU and Hyderabad University bringing forward student leaders like Kanhaiya Kumar, Rohit Vemula, Dontha Prashanth and all. So campuses are source of turmoil and change. Well that's going to happen and we/you have to deal with that ...

Q. Thank you so much Ma'am.

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