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**Gail Omvedt's *Dalit Visions*: A Look at Various Alternative Movements Which Rose Under the Larger Dalit Movement****Aayushi Sangharshee**

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**DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2020.4.6.05****Abstract**

There is no denying the fact that whenever any section of the society is overly exploited, agitations and protests are a natural consequence and the agitation by the Dalits in India are no exceptions. The 1920s was the time when a number of Dalit movements came to the forefront, nurtured by the rising consciousness to fight back against any kind of exploitation. This paper seeks to analyse Gail Omvedt's *Dalit Visions*, a book which explores how various small Dalit movements emerged under the larger Dalit movement and toiled to create for themselves equal opportunities as other upper caste and class sections of the Hindu society had. Omvedt in her book talks about how different groups of society challenged the different aspects of the hegemonic Hindu society. If we club together all the various movements which emerged under the larger Dalit movement, then we can see that though they all differed in their specific methods and objectives and, all had the common and more general agenda of resisting all kinds of exploitation and Hindu hegemony.

**Keywords-** Dalit Movement, Hegemony, Exploitation, Untouchables, Protest, Ambedkar.

Gail Omvedt is an Indian scholar-activist of American origin and is a well-known name in the field of Dalit literature. Her literary texts question the hegemonic tendencies of certain sections of the society and revolve around issues such as caste, class and gender. Omvedt's *Dalit Visions* is a collection of eleven essays which highlight how various social forces emerged within the larger Dalit movement and how they confronted Brahmanic Hinduism in all its forms. Omvedt highlights the anger of different sections of the society which were suppressed by the dominant Hindu cult and how they fought their own alternate battles against the exploitation. Omvedt's book explores how the oppressed sections of the society, in their fight against Brahmanic hegemony turned out to be a lot more than just being anti-Brahmanic. These movements, though not large scale in nature, contributed a significant bit to the anti-centralist, anti-patriarchal and the anti-Hindu ethos of a major section of the society.

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Omvedt in her book talks about how the suppressed masses over different periods of time in the history of India revolted in their own alternate ways against Hinduism. In her book, she talks about a number of activists, beginning from Jotiba Phule to Namdeo Dhasal and she also talks about a number of lesser known activists such as Pandita Ramabai and Mangoo Ram, who stood against exploitation. Different activists challenged different aspects of Hinduism: Jotiba Phule (1827-1890) confronted the ritualistic aspect of Hinduism, Tarabai Shinde (1850-1910) and Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) were against the patriarchal nature of Hinduism, leaders of the non-Brahman movements saw Hinduism as an Aryan conquest, and similarly Periyar (1879-1973) saw Hinduism as a North central rule.

Beginning with Jyotibha Phule, Omvedt shows how the oppressed classes of Indian society in different phases of history uncovered and confronted different aspects of Hinduism. She focuses on how Phule saw Hinduism as a means of Brahmanical exploitation. Phule, in his book, *Gulamgiri*, parallels the exploitation done by American settlers on the native Indians to the exploitation done by the Aryan invaders on native aboriginals in India. He treated caste exploitation as equal to slavery and he worked mainly for the 'shudras' of Maharashtra which were different from Dalits or the 'atishudras'. Omvedt highlights Phule's act of re-interpreting the Puranic mythology. He shows how Phule re-interpreted the Maharashtrian story of Raja Bali and the Brahman kid named Waman in which Waman asks for three steps of land and upon being granted his wish, he steps on Bali's head thrusting him down to Hell. Phule re-told it as a story of Aryan conquest of the peasant community of the Indian land. Phule defends the peasant community of the shudras against the Brahman Aryan bureaucracy. Omvedt also highlights that Phule did not see Hinduism merely as a religion, but as a bag of superstition with all its mythologies which it uses as a way of domination over others.

If Phule saw Hinduism as Brahmanical domination, other activists like Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde saw Hinduism as manifestations of patriarchy. Just like Phule criticised one aspect of Brahmanic hegemony i.e. the ritualistic and superstitious aspect, similarly Ramabai and Shinde's attack the patriarchal and Hindi centered aspect of Hinduism. Pandita Ramabai condemned Sanskrit tradition of Hinduism which can be seen as very patriarchal in nature. According to Ramabai, the law-giver Manu was a despicable figure because he in the *Manusmriti* portrayed women as the most hateful creatures on the Earth. Though she worked only for the high caste Hindu women, we know that women of both high and low caste were subject to oppression by the patriarchal Hindu society. Second we have Tarabai Shinde who also challenged patriarchal domination of Hinduism. In her book *Stri-Purush Tulna* she says that there are a dozen reasons to not be a 'pativrata' or a fully obedient wife. She backs her argument by backing up with mythological references of women like Draupadi, Kunti, Savitri who were depicted as being subservient to their husbands.

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After having looked at Hinduism as Brahmanic exploitation and Hinduism as patriarchal oppression, Omvedt makes us look at another aspect of Hinduism that is Hinduism as Aryan conquest as perceived by the Dalit Radicals of the 1920s. In the 1920s, the Dalit movements and non-Brahman movements came up who believed that the Aryans usurped their land and exploited the aboriginals through their Brahman ideology. The Dalits of Andhra identified themselves as 'adi-Andhras', Tamil Dalits identified themselves as 'adi-Dravidas'. The prefix 'adi-' means adivasi or the original inhabitants of India who were replaced by the Hindu Aryans. Mangoo Ram, Kisan Bansode, Achutanand and Bhagyareddy Varma emerged as leaders of the 'adi-movement' in different parts of India. Omvedt notes that education played an important role in mobilising the masses. What was significant about the movement was that it emerged as both a caste movement and a class movement as the non-Brahmans and the Dalits caste united to fight against the Hindu Aryan class of people.

Spanning the contribution of different activists in the Dalit movement, Omvedt assigns utmost importance to one the biggest personalities of the Dalit movement: Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar (1891-1956), who contributed whole-heartedly in social, political and religious fields for the upliftment of the Dalits. The Mahars of Maharashtra called him 'Babasaheb' with love and respect. Eleanor Zelliott in her book, *From Untouchable To Dalit*, says, "Ambedkar played three roles: that of a caste leader, that of an Untouchable spokesman, and that of a national statesman" (Zelliott 78). He led the Mahad satyagraha, the very first "untouchable liberation movement" which ended up on a very significant note with the public burning of *Manusmriti*, the sacred law book of the Hindus. Omvedt highlights Ambedkar's ideology as contradictory to that of Gandhi and their face-off escalated into their clash during the historical Poona Pact of 1932 over the issue of the electorates. In 1932, Ambedkar, in the Second Round Table Conference, put forward the proposal of separate electorates for the Dalits. As a response to Ambedkar's demand, Gandhi undertook fast unto death and Ambedkar was compelled to mould his demands. Though Poona Pact did not provide the Dalits with a separate electorates, but it gave special representation to the Scheduled Castes for a period of ten years. Ambedkar also formed the Independent Labour Party which stood against oppression and indeed became the biggest opposition to bourgeois Congress which was Hindu dominant. The main thrust of Babasaheb was to unite the non-Brahmans and the Dalits and lead them against Brahmanism and landlordism.

In this paper, since I have already explained the ideas of Ambedkar and Phule, we can now look at a comparative study of both. We saw that Phule had denied to recognise Hinduism as a religion and thought of it only as a means of oppression and exploitation. Ambedkar and the later Radicals, did oppose Hinduism but they did not deny its legitimacy. They saw Hinduism as a full-fledged reality which had to be dismantled for the upliftment of the Dalits. Another important area of comparison between Ambedkar's ideology and Phule's ideology concerns their relation with the mythic past. Phule re-interpreted the stories of the

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mythic past in favour of the downtrodden. He urged the oppressed people to believe that they were the original inhabitants of India who were invaded by the Aryan settlers. Also, he re-interpreted the various incarnations of Vishnu as levels of conquering India by the Hindu Aryans. Ambedkar, on the other hand, urged the Dalits to be militants instead of looking back at the past. Moreover, he helped in the formation of the Mahar regiment and urged a multitude of Mahars to become a part of the army. So we can see that even though Ambedkar and Phule differed to a certain extent in their ideologies, they both aimed at upliftment of the oppressed classes at the hands of the Hindus.

While talking about Ambedkar, it is also important to look at the confrontation between Ambedkar's idea of Participatory Democracy as opposed to Nehru's idea of secularism and Gandhi's reformist ideas. Ambedkar saw democracy as a way of uplifting the Dalits, giving them the power to participate in the decision making process of the nation. According to him, the Brahman Hindus could not represent the non-Brahmans and the Dalits and so he argued for a special representation of the Dalits in the new democratic setup of India. On the other hand, according to Gandhi's reformist ideas, India should be seen as an amalgamation of a number of communities in which each community could uphold their individual identity but they should unite as Indians. Both had different views but the problem with Gandhi's reformist ideas, as Omvedt notes in her book, was that he identified himself as a Hindu even though he believed that caste has nothing to do with religion. His identification as a Hindu could be implied as an osmosis in the caste ethos itself. Omvedt says that the hypocrisy of Gandhi's ideas is evident from the fact that he wanted to create a 'Ram Raj'. Omvedt criticises not just Gandhi's diplomatic attitude, but also finds Nehru's ideas as problematic. According to her, Nehru's idea of secularism, though a bit different from Gandhi's ideas, it also had its own problems. According to Nehru's idea of secularism, India could be unified only if it cuts across the boundaries of its plurality and gets over its caste conflicts. Omvedt in her book argued that even Nehru's idea of secularism is problematic because even though Nehru appreciated India's diversity and respected the individuality of every religion yet he saw Hinduism as the 'national' religion of the people of India. The main point of the argument, as Omvedt shows in her book, is that even though we assume ourselves to be unprejudiced, the dominant ideology, Hinduism in this case, never ceases to exist in our lives. This is the reason why Ambedkar urged Congress to give special representation to the Dalits in the new democratic framework of the country.

It is true that Omvedt dedicated a huge chunk of her book to Ambedkar's contribution towards upliftment of the masses, but she also showcased the contribution of other activists who confronted various aspects of Hindu domination in their own alternate ways. Apart from highlighting different aspects of hegemonic Hinduism, Gail Omvedt brings forth another aspect of Hinduism i.e. Hinduism as a north-centralist rule. As the British colonial period in India neared its end, another well known activist from Madras, Periyar E. V. Ramasamy

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(1879-1973) came to the limelight for his opposition to Hinduism as North centralist rule. He revolted against the 'Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan' concept of the North Indian fundamentalists. Omvedt in her book argued that the movement led by Periyar can be seen as anti-Northern, anti-centralist and anti-Brahmanic in nature. Periyar believed that for the country to become free in a true sense, three conditions should be fulfilled: destruction of the Congress, destruction of the Hindu religion and lastly the destruction of Brahmanism. Periyar in his journal titled *Kudi Arasu* questioned Gandhi's defiance of the 'varnashrama dharma' of the Hindus. In 1926, he founded the Self Respect League which turned into a Tamil Nadu wide movement. The main agenda of the movement was opposition to Brahmanism, liberation of women and destruction of caste system. But the movement dissolved because India was under British rule and it was important for India to unite and fight back British imperialism. And in such a scenario, linguistic and regional nationalism would pose a threat to India's prospect of gaining Independence. What was significant about the movement was that it challenged the North bias of Hindu tradition and it linked itself with the caste movement, though it could not achieve success.

When it comes to different small movements which rose under the larger Dalit movement, a study of Dalit Panthers becomes inevitable. When atrocities over the Dalits increased throughout the country and the Dalits who were now educated or semi educated, formed an anti-caste organisation named Dalit Panthers. It was founded by Namdeo Dhasal (1949-2014), Raja Dhale (born 1940) and Arun Kamble (1953-2009), in Bombay who organised the Dalits into a revolutionary organisation in the year 1972. Omvedt in her book argued for the Revolutionary politics of the organisation and highlighted the most contested question of the time that was "will the caste war turn into a class war?" (Omvedt 201). Omvedt points out in her book that the Dalit Panthers differed from Ambedkar's movement in one significant way: the Dalit Panthers wanted to identify the Dalits as proletarian class unlike the Dalits during Babasaheb's time who did not give much importance to the economic sphere. A number of factors were responsible for the rise of the Dalit Panthers: spread of education, food crisis of the 1960s, disillusionment with Babasaheb's Republican Party, a new Dalit consciousness. Omvedt in her book shows that the Dalit Panthers saw "Hinduism as feudal backwardness". The *Dalit Panthers Manifesto* mainly criticised Hinduism as feudalism and defined the term 'Dalit' as inclusive of all the exploited sections of the society. With the Dalit Panthers fighting with a proletariat identity, what was significant was that the caste and class divisions got together. The organisation resulted in a new Dalit consciousness which indeed united all the exploited sections of the society. Later on, it laid the base for many other small movements which emerged against exploitation, such as the farmer's movement, the environment movement, the women's movement.

After having looked at the various alternative movements nurtured within the larger Dalit movement, Omvedt analyses the reasons why none of the movements succeeded. The

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most important factor responsible, as Omvedt pointed out, was that all the anti-Aryan, anti-Hindu, anti-centralist movements which rose in different parts of the country were all fragmented and none of them could rise so much as to reach the level of mass mobilisation. None of them could pose a serious threat to the all-powerful Hindu religion. Omvedt points out that the major problem with the Tamil nationalist movement was that it never sought to connect its issues with the issues of the Dalits. M. C. Rajah was the most famous Dalit leader in Tamil Nadu but he never allied with the Tamil nationalist movement. Dalit support would have given the Tamil movement a wider and a stronger base thereby increasing its chances of success to a certain extent. Omvedt also argues that the “socialist pattern of development” chosen by Nehru during the Second Five Year Plan also consolidated his position as a leader and a planner. The Second Five Year Plan focused on Industrialisation which was much needed by India at the time of Independence. Another important reason, as presented by Omvedt, for the failure of the various movements which rose under the Dalit Movement, was that the boundaries of Brahmanism and Bureaucratisation often overlapped. The Brahmans never set loose their hands off the Bureaucracy. The Brahmans or the upper caste Hindus remained all-powerful and they were little affected, if at all, by the various anti-caste, anti-hindu, anti-centralist, anti-patriarchal movements which rose in different parts of the country.

Finally, I conclude by saying that although the various alternative movements which rose against exploitation failed individually, but the collective long terms effects of the movements was no doubt positive. The Indian Constitution provides a number of guarantees to the ex-Untouchables. Article 15 of the Constitution of India prohibits the state from doing discrimination to any citizen on the basis of religion, caste, sex, birth or race. Article 16 gives equal opportunity to all citizens in matters of public employment. Finally, Article 17 abolishes all forms of Untouchability. Moreover, it is clear that evocation of the past continue to play a major role in altering the status of the Dalits. Present builds upon the past and the Dalits definitely have a very rich past of their caste and class struggle.

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