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Gail and Bharat: Somnath Waghmare's tale of love, resistance, and radical imagination

Feminist scholar and activist Gail Omvedt's legacy endures – not just in her writings, but in every act of courage that defies the logic of caste. Dr Ruhi Khan, Professor Shakuntala Banaji and Professor Meena Dhanda reflect on Somnath Waghmare's film Gail and Bharat, which ensures that Omvedt's story, beautifully entwined with that of her activist husband Bharat Patankar, remains part of India's collective memory.

Few partnerships in modern India have shaped the conversation on caste, gender, and equality as profoundly as that of Gail Omvedt and Bharat Patankar. Their story, one of a transnational intellectual meeting of minds, of love grounded in shared activism, and of a relentless pursuit of justice, is brought to life with rare tenderness in **Somnath Waghmare's** moving new documentary, *Gail and Bharat*, screened at LSE on 14 October 2025.

Through this deeply personal film, Waghmare, who is himself an **Ambedkarite** scholar and filmmaker, captures the intimacy and intellectual vibrancy of a couple whose lives were inseparable from the social movements they inspired. "There are no films on the lives of Dalit activists. Our history needs to be preserved," he told a packed auditorium at the LSE. The film, made on a modest budget, received no institutional funding and was driven solely by Waghmare's desire to preserve the couple's legacy. In doing so, he not only documents a remarkable partnership but also traces the emotional and ethical depth behind decades of **anti-caste activism, grassroots feminist thought, and struggles for agricultural workers rights in India.**

Gail and Bharat is a poignant film that foregrounds the portrayal of an exceptional couple, living incessantly revolutionary lives, quietly, persistently, courageously. The film captures intimacy without intrusion and links the very personal to the global. These global connections are presented vividly through many images: Bharat's T-shirt – with the slogan – Close Immigrant Prisons, a photo of Gail speaking at a rally against University of California investments in South Africa during

apartheid, and then in the footage of her addressing a rally in her inimitable energising way in 2012, where she tells her audience: 'Rosa sat, so Martin could walk, Martin walked, so Obama could run, Obama ran, so your children could fly.' She praises **Rosa Parks**, the 'common maidservant' whose action precipitated anti-apartheid protests in the USA and sparked the Civil Rights Movement. Gail's smile when she recalls Rosa is filled with hope, and it says everything about her belief in the power of the struggles of ordinary people, not just the leaders.

Gail Omvedt: The Scholar Who Lived Her Politics

Born in Minnesota, USA, Gail Omvedt arrived in India in the late 1960s to research caste and social movements in India. But what began as an academic pursuit soon became a lifelong commitment. Her groundbreaking book **Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India (1976)** remains a landmark in the study of subaltern politics. Unlike much academic work of the time, Gail's writing was not confined to the university. She lived in the villages of Maharashtra, worked alongside activists, and wrote with the conviction that ideas must serve emancipation.

Gail's intellectual contributions were immense: **she reinterpreted** Phule, Ambedkar, and the Dalit-Bahujan movements not as reactions to oppression but as creative, affirmative struggles for equality and dignity. She insisted that feminism in India could not be separated from caste, and that women's liberation must be rooted in the anti-caste tradition. Gail's later works, such as **Dalits and the Democratic Revolution (1994)** and **Seeking Begumpura (2008)**, continued to push the boundaries of feminist and sociological thought, marrying rigorous scholarship with moral clarity.

The relationship between caste and class, theorised by Gail Omvedt, and the connection between race and caste as two comparable systems of oppression and exploitation imbedded within capitalism in their respective locations, demand evermore a concerted, global response through the struggle of the oppressed, as Gail reminds us; since capitalism needed the whole world as its playground from the beginning.

Gail's intellectual brilliance was never solitary. At every stage, her life intertwined with that of Dr Bharat Patankar – a trained gynaecologist, who lived as an activist, thinker, and partner – sharing her belief that personal relationships are also political spaces of equality. Their daughter, Prachi, recalls in the documentary how her parents were always involved in activism, and her childhood memories were often a melody of Dalit activism songs. Now, an **activist** herself, she grudgingly admits that, as a child, she felt neglected and deprived since all her parents' attention and resources went into activism.

Bharat Patankar: Partner, Co-Thinker and Anchor

Bharat Patankar, himself a veteran of Maharashtra's farmers' and workers' movements, embodied a politics that refused hierarchy. His **ideas** of transformative cultural politics and grassroots democracy complemented Gail's feminist vision. Together, they founded the *Shramik Mukti Dal*, an organisation that united struggles for land, water, gender justice, and cultural renewal. Early in the film, we see the threatening rise of Hindutva thuggery, of sending death threats to activists, like Sampat Desai, who works with Bharat in *Shramik Mukti Dal*.

An interesting intervention in the film was the protest in 2018, when Gail is seen as slowing down due to ill health, but Bharat is vigorously challenging the control of a temple by Brahmins. This was one of his many protests as President of *Shramik Mukti Dal*. A scene from the film shows Bharat and Gail visiting the Mahalakshmi temple in Kolhapur, but are not allowed entry by the officiating Brahmins into the 'inner sanctum' of the goddess Ambabai ostensibly because they had 'not donned saffron robes'. A verbal argument ensues where Bharat challenges the assumption that Brahmins, rather than the non-Brahmin devotees of Ambabai (the name by which the goddess Mahalaxmi is known) get to decide who can gain proximity to the idol,

Earlier in the film, we see a meeting protesting the **killing** of Dr Narendra Dabolkar, Dr MM Kulbargi, Gauri Lankesh and Com Govind Pansare, where there is a banner in Marathi roughly translateable as '*True courage lies in confronting ideology with critical thinking*'. This, with the extended shot of the confrontation Bharat has with the Brahmins, is fascinating and instructive. There is a reference to Ambedkar's 1930 temple entry protest, but for Ambedkar, temple entry was a civil rights issue, not a religious issue, and the protest was intended to expose the hypocrisy of upper-caste Hindus who profess equality. Later, he gave up temple-entry as a means of protest. "Today, the day deliberately chosen for the premier of Gail & Bharat at LSE, is Dhammachakra Parivartan Din (the 69th anniversary of the day that Dr B.R. Ambedkar led 500000 Dalits to convert to Buddhism in Nagpur)," says Waghmare. Twenty-two vows were taken that day. One of the vows was not to worship the gods and goddesses of Hindus.

For Bharat, it seems there is more to claiming the right to worship *Ambabai*. Bharat claims ownership of the goddess as 'our goddess'. Perhaps here, there is a tension within performative religious engagement when one is representing people in a movement. The refusal of *darshan* – coming up close to the deity – is taken as an 'insult to the Bahujan community'. Bharat contests the '*parampara*' (tradition), and says it is different from religion, and he knows what religion is, and it is not what is defined by saffron-clad Brahmins.

Gail does not bow before the goddess, and Waghmare's camera captures her later sitting on the steps outside with other women. By including this clip, Waghmare has indicated complex aspects of the movement that seeks to retain a genuine connection with the religious beliefs and lives of working people, as it surges towards a revolutionary future.

Breaking Boundaries: A Revolutionary Farewell

The last scene of the couple together is also perhaps the most powerful sequence of the entire film. It shows Bharat gently feeding and caring for Gail with a Bob Dylan song playing in the background, as she slips into dementia. Shot in almost sepia colours, with little light, where Bharat helps Gail eat from a bowl, washes her hands, and then urges her, gently, but firmly: '*Let me see how you stand up...on your own. C'mon, Gail!*' This scene is heartbreakingly touching: her frailty, his devoted care. A scene that made viewers' eyes fill, and a moment that captured the quiet strength of this partnership. In that act of care lies a metaphor for their shared life: a politics of love and equality lived in everyday gestures.

Gail and Bharat is also an extraordinary meditation on death and legacy. The scenes following Gail's passing are both heartbreaking and inspiring. Their daughter, Prachi, lights her mother's funeral pyre – defying Brahmanical patriarchal custom and reminding us that feminist resistance continues through generations. The funeral itself becomes a tableau of India's plural radicalism: Buddhist chants blending with Ambedkarite songs, laal salaams, Left slogans, and folk traditions. It is a farewell that refuses orthodoxy, a public assertion that liberation movements – whether feminist, Dalit, or socialist – are bound by shared ethics of equality and compassion.

Somnath Waghmare's Lens: Cinema as Memory and Movement

Professor Meena Dhanda, Professor Shakuntala Banaji, and filmmaker Somnath Waghmare

Filmmaker Somnath Waghmare has long used cinema as a means to archive voices often erased from mainstream narratives. His earlier works, like *The Battle of Bhima Koregaon* and *Chaityabhumi*, (which premiered at LSE's Department of Media and Communications in 2023), explore Dalit assertion, memory, and identity with quiet intensity. In *Gail and Bharat*, he turns his lens inward, tracing the tenderness and political courage of a relationship that embodies the values of the movements he documents. "Their village is just 7 km from mine. I grew up observing them and participating in their anti-caste protests," says Waghmare.

Intellectually, the film skilfully intersperses Gail's and Bharat's speeches with academic commentary from Dr Suraj Yengde (who attended the event at LSE), Prof Abhinaya Ramesh and Prof Ramesh Kamble. But the film's emotional power lies in its simplicity. There is no forced drama, no cinematic flourish – just the steady unfolding of a shared life devoted to equality – sometimes with an unsteady camera, sometimes with fumbles in speech. Through everyday moments like conversation, singing songs, caregiving, and ritual, Waghmare allows viewers to see how politics and love can coexist.

Gail and Bharat premiered at LSE, followed by a response by Professor Meena Dhanda (whose comments are integrated here) and Q&A with the director Somnath Waghmare. The event was chaired by Professor Shakuntala Banaji, who had met Gail Omvedt and Bharat Patankar 40 years ago. This post gives the views of the authors and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

About the author

Ruhi Khan

Dr Ruhi Khan, FRSA, is a journalist and an ESRC researcher at the London School of Economics. Drawing on decolonial and feminist frameworks, her research critically examines media systems, gender, and the political economy of AI and technology, shaping academic and industry perspectives on inclusive and equitable tech development.

Shakuntala Banaji

Dr Shakuntala Banaji is Professor of Media, Culture and Social Change in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE, where she also serves as Director of Graduate Studies and Programme Director for the MSc Media, Communication and Development. She lectures on

International Media and the Global South, Film theory and World Cinema, and Critical Approaches to Media, Communication and Development in the Department of Media and Communications at the LSE. She has published extensively on young people, children and media as well as gender, ethnicity and new media and cinema, with articles on Hindi horror films, social media use in the Middle East and North Africa and children, social class and media in India recently published; and chapters on orientalism and racism in Media, and child stars in Hindi cinema available. She has also published on misinformation and fake news, creativity, democracy, the internet and civic participation.

Meena Dhanda

Professor Meena Dhanda is Professor in Philosophy and Cultural Politics at the University of Wolverhampton, and Visiting Professor at the LSE. She is a leading scholar on caste and identity, focussing on casteism as a form of racism. Her research as a socially engaged political philosopher is transdisciplinary. She explores the conjugations of caste, class, gender, and race, drawing attention to the social injustices faced by oppressed groups, and their individual and collective resistance to domination.

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