

**Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives**  
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**Week-05**  
**Lecture-23**

Gail Omvedt: Towards a Historical Materialist Analysis of the Origin and Development of Caste I

Welcome back to the class. We have been discussing about the Marxian approach to the study of Indian society and in the previous two classes we looked at his larger or Marxian understanding of Marxian theory on historical materialism and the understanding of social change. These are kind of grand theories, very hotly debated, contested theories for the past at least a century but continue to be quite influential among the Marxian circles. And when it comes to the question of adopting Marxian sociology to the understanding of Indian society, it is very evident that Marxian sociology is kind of a marginal in the Indian context. There were very few people who adopted a very visibly Marxian framework to understand Indian society. So, from the beginning A.R. Desai is one of the very important names. He was a very important scholar and his work on Indian nationalism, the book, *The Social Background of Indian Nationalism* has been a very widely discussed and celebrated book. And his another book titled *Rural Sociology in India* is also used by students of sociology.

So, A.R. Desai was one of the very important sociologist who used Marxian framework to the understanding of Indian society. Then another person is R.K. Mukherjee. So, barring these two people, Marxian sociology has never been very prominent in the Indian scenario and as we have discussed in the previous classes, one of the reasons is the predominance of British influence on Indian society and especially that of structural functionalism and social anthropology from the social anthropology. And in this class and in the next one, but we are going to discuss a very interesting sociologist by name Gail Omvedt. And Gail Omvedt is a very, very, she passed away last year. She was a very, very influential, very noted sociologist who contributed immensely to the study of Dalit movement and backward class movement in India.

She was an American citizen who came to India for her PhD. Then she kind of, she was very fascinated by the country. She got married to an Indian social activist, settled here and in late, 1980s, she accepted Indian citizenship and then she passed away last year at

the age of 80. So, her works have been quite influential in the studies on caste and backward class movement. And in today's class and this session as well as the next one, we are going to discuss her, one of the very important essays which is taken from this book, the "Dalit and the Democratic Revolution", Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in colonial India.

There is a chapter titled, Towards a Historical Materialist Analysis of the Origins and Development of Caste. And this essay, I decided to choose this essay because of two reasons. One is, it actually provides a kind of Marxian interpretation to the development of caste. And secondly, it is another very important contribution to the study of Dalit sociology or sociology that looks into the questions of caste, discrimination and other things. We have a we have a chapter; we have a series of sessions on Dalit sociology coming down the line.

But I thought it would be better to introduce Gail Omvedt in the very beginning because she is a very noted scholar. So, these are PPT s directly taken from her work, this essay, Towards a Historical Materialist Analysis of the Origins and Development of Caste. So, she says that theories of caste exist within societies characterized by caste. They exist at two levels. She is trying to understand how caste, what are the kind of theories about caste exist and according to her it exists at two levels.

One is in the fragmented, unarticulated, normally unconscious rules of behavior embodied in the social relations characteristic of caste society. This is about the kind of commonsensical knowledge and practices that are part and parcel of our everyday behavior in a caste society. How do we behave according to the kind of caste rules and other things. They are not theorized, they are not articulated, they are not kind of generalized, they are just followed on the basis of our lived experience. And the second, in the articulated and elaborated ideologies, they are used by those seeking to maintain or contest hegemony within the society or to challenge the society on a basic way.

Second is the kind of theorization she says is presented by two section of people. One is the kind of people who want to maintain the same social order. The other one is who want to challenge this kind of hegemony. So, both of them tend to theorize it, they tend to generalize it, they tend to provide larger explanations about it. Dalit and non-brahmin movement developed their own theories of caste with the specific focus of using theory as a guide for achieving the abolition of caste and exploitation and oppression it involved.

So, theorization we will discuss in the coming classes. A very important argument by scholars like Gopal Guru about the need for Dalit scholars to engage in very serious theory making. Because this theory is important to understand how caste works and it is

also important, theory also helps you to devise ways and means to fight the kind of oppressions and then exploitation associated with caste. So, in taking this as their goal, they made certain assumptions. That is caste had an origin in history and just as it had an origin, it could have an end and the action of the oppressed and exploited could be effective in aiding this process.

So, she is talking about as I mentioned earlier, she was a very important scholar of Mahatma Phule, and she was a very important scholar of Ambedkar. Gail Omvedt identified herself as a scholar who had, who kind of sympathized or who openly declared her support unflinching support to the Dalit core. So, she was not kind of pretending to be neutral in that sense. Her political positions were very clear. So, she is saying, she is arguing that this theorization come from the Dalit Bahujan sections come with the understanding that caste had an origin and it also should have an end and with human intervention, human action, human involvement and human consolidated social movement, we will be able to bring about a kind of a change to this enduring social system.

This constituted quite a modern assumptions and plays them at odds with any theories assuming that caste is effectively eternal and unshakable. So, this argument, this kind of theoretical argument as Gail Omvedt argues, is at odds with a lot of theological or religious explanation which says that okay this caste has a theological base, it is based on Brahma and all such kind of external kind of arguments. Omvedt's framework of this study agrees with these basic assumptions and draws not only on Marx but upon what is increasingly being called as the Phule Ambedkar thought. So, as I mentioned earlier, Gail Omvedt was one of the important scholars who tried to integrate a Marxian theory with that of the Ambedkar and Phule tradition of social thinking because as you know, Ambedkar and Phule, they were the one who laid the foundation for a very strong Dalit movement and who wanted us to focus on the questions of exploitation and discrimination and the Marxian framework really focuses on the question of economic exploitation. So, she was to a large extent successful in combining these two states.

The theories of non-Brahmin and Dalit movement confronted two types of ideologies used to legitimate caste society. First, there was a traditional religiously based ideologies, developed primarily by Brahmins harking back to the laws of Manu and the 'creation hymn' of the Rig Veda and the sacred texts Shastras, Smritis etc. So, you know that especially when we talk about the origin of Varnas, so it is said that the Brahmins came from the mouth of the Brahma, then the Kshatriyas from the arms, Vaishyas from the thighs and the Shudras from the feet. So, these kinds of religious explanations have certain scriptural sanctions and that is visible in the Hindu text. Upper caste social reformers from 19th century activists like Ram Mohan Roy, Agarkar to Gandhi tried to

argue for scriptural justification for a change in or even abolition of the Jati and Varna system.

So, it is very interesting to see that a host of social reformers of the 19th century, they believed that caste system was an aberration. So, it was an aberration, of course it exists, but it does not have any scriptural sanction. So, scriptural sanction is something like that it is mentioned in the Hindu scriptures. So, what they argued, these scholars argued that caste system does not have a scriptural sanction. Hindu religion does not authorize or does not condone or does not prescribe caste system or Varna system.

So, and hence they wanted to abolish it. So, this was a very, very, very interesting ways in which quite a lot of social evils were looked down upon by Indian scholars as well as that of the colonial administrators. Whereas social revolutionaries like Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar agreed with the conservatives that the Hindu scriptures necessarily implied observation of caste hierarchy and used this to denounce them as irrational and exploitative. On the other hand, Ambedkar and Phule, they could really demonstrate that the caste practices and exploitation and discrimination has scriptural sanction. It has, it is based on the actual Hindu scriptures and actual Hindu scriptures including the Smritis, Manusmritis and Shastras and other things, they actually provide justification to these kind of practices.

Or in other words, they are religiously sanctioned by Hindu scriptures. With the colonial rule, Aryan theory of race entered the ideological arena to serve as an ideological legitimization of the system of caste hierarchy. So, with the colonial rule and quite a lot of research and scholarly intervention into the history, the ancient history of India, especially that of languages, this whole argument about this Aryan theory of race, Aryan invasion, Aryan theory of race came into picture. It originated by European orientalist propagated by British administrators in their censuses and provincial studies of caste groups picked up by early modernist Brahmins as a way of asserting their equivalence with the white skinned conquerors and their superiority to the dark-skinned lower caste and then taken up by Jyotiba Phule and later radicals. So, basically this Aryan theory argues that the Aryans came, there is a kind of connection between Aryans and the European, you know, Cocosoid race.

Aryans came from outside and there was the Dasas or the Dark skin people in India and there was a battle and the Dasas were conquered by the Aryans. So, the white skinned people, they, today's Brahmins are the descendants of this white skinned people and the dark-skinned people were driven south to the southern peninsular part of India and they are the kind of present-day, you know, lower caste and then other arguments and other people. These radical theories agreed with the majority middle and lower caste, that the

majority middle and lower caste, Shudras and Adi Shudras or outcasts in the Varna interpretations were descendants of the non-Aryan original inhabitants while Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas were descendants of their Indo-European Aryan Vedic conquerors. So, this argument is very, very prevalent in a whole lot of places that this division between Arya and Dravida and whole of peninsular India is being inhabited by Dravida race which is very distinct from the Aryan. So, these arguments are very, very prevalent.

Phule's was the first historical materialist theory of caste, and it heralded major themes of the Dalit and non-Brahmin movements that were developed in the 20th century. In Phule's hands, it was much more than a simple racial theory. Rather, Phule used the dominant racial framework of the Aryan theory to evolve a total depiction of the role of violence and community. So, Jyotirao Phule's, he very creatively used this racial theory basically to present a more complex and nuanced theory about caste. Later movements, however, lost these nuances and tended to assert it as a simple racial ideology of superiority against the increasingly aggressive and sophisticated ideologies of caste legitimacy used by the growing Hindu revivalist movement.

So, that streak of more nuanced arguments by Phule was kind of lost later and it became kind of much more cruder articulations. In the 1920s, the 1920s saw the emergence of Marxism asserting a new theory of exploitation and liberation, claiming to have a total analysis applicable to India as to any society. It was rapidly picked up by a group of young, educated and mostly upper caste radical nationalists searching for a mass base of the movement and eventually founding a new communist and socialist party. So, by 1920s, as you know, the communist ideology began to spread to different countries and communist social theory also provided very fascinating theoretical framework to make sense of the kind of social hierarchy Indian society and especially the role of economic, especially the role of economic activities in dividing people into poor and rich and this was kind of was found to be very attractive and fascinating by a host of young scholars who were mostly from the upper caste. Marxism as a theory and ideology came to India and existed for 50 years in a fairly mechanical vulgarized form with the solitary exception of D.D. Kosambi. So, this is again a very interesting argument because one of the major criticisms against Marxism, not only in India but even in general is that quite a lot of its proponents understood and engaged with Marxism in a very deterministic reductionist and then vulgar form. There is an argument, there are lot of interesting arguments about economic determinism. I am not going into that but I hope you remember that in the previous class we spoke about the base and superstructure and how there was a debate whether Marx actually spoke about the economy determining the superstructure or not. But quite a lot of Marxian scholars in India as elsewhere used it in a very mechanical manner and a very reductionist manner and thereby claiming this title

vulgar Marxism. Even Marx was not, Marx did not approve of this kind of a tendency.

Its contribution to all liberation movements was its firm assertion that social systems and relations are historical. Very, very important argument which we found in the previous argument. They have come into existence, change, and will come to an end, will change, and will come to an end. Material, they have a solid base in production and collective, non-ideal social forces and characterized by conflict, contradiction, and exploitation. So, these are the three, they are historical, they are material and the nature of this historical materialism is that of conflict, contradiction and exploitation.

We discussed it in the previous classes. Its disadvantage was that it took the overriding reality of class and class struggle so strongly as to assert the fundamental irrelevance of any other sociological category. And this is again, you know, you must be familiar because this is one of the greatest criticisms against Marxism. Because it, to a large extent, for a long time, it refused to accept other categories like race or gender or caste as equally important to that of class.

And this was a major, major shortcoming. This was a major issue that lot of other sociologists found with the early classical Marxism. At first, the power of the class metaphor seemed so strong that, strong both for analysis and as a guide to action that it was easy for the proponents of Marxism and socialism to treat family kinship, the state, gender in India and of course caste as not only secondary but partially non-existent factors. So, the same argument that the typical Marxian scholar would render these important factors like family kinship, the state, gender, and caste are as kind of irrelevant because for them, class is the most fundamental social category. A large number of the Marxist influenced theoretical and empirical studies even during the 70s and 80s identified their radicalism with the assertion that behind the apparent reality of caste ultimately lay class and dialectics, a class contented to a caste form. So, this was again a very fascinating debate, many of these scholars argued that if you solve the class problem, caste problem also will get solved.

Or in other words, if you are able to resolve the exploitation and class disparity between people, the caste system will disappear. Or in other words, in a classless society, in an egalitarian society, caste will not exist. And you know that these arguments are quite superfluous. There is hardly any major debate about that currently. This Marxist mechanical materialism not only succeeded in becoming the primary ideological guiding or at least uniting the developing working class and present movements of the country at a national level.

It also exerted powerful influence over the anti-caste movement. So, in a sense,

Marxism prevented a kind of more powerful expression of Dalit movement or anti-caste movement in India. And there are arguments that in places where communism or Marxism was very, very, very strong, it will to a large extent directly or indirectly prevented lower caste mobilization or anti-caste mobilization from taking its own form, because they were appropriated by the left parties. For even when anti-caste movements challenged Marxist thinking to assert the centrality of caste, it tended to do so with an acceptance of the fundamental framework accepted by Marxism. For Phule, economic and social and political domination and exploitation had been interwoven factors, which is one of the reasons why it is inadequate to call his racial theory.

However, it was Marxism that set up for decades to come the paradigmatic polarities of class and caste based on super structure, economics and social-cultural ideology. So, Phule had a much more nuanced and complex understanding about the forms of exploitation. He was not ready to provide a particular kind of domination, more primacy over the others. So, for him, economic and social and political domination and exploitation had been interwoven factors. So, he was not ready to see that the economic is something more predominant than the others.

So, all these binary polarities like class and caste based on super structure, economic and social and cultural ideological, this division he was not ready to accept. For communist and social activists and for Nehruvite progressives, this meant taking class, the base economic as primary and for the anti-caste radical sentiment, it meant simply turning the polarity round. So, he says that this, Gail Omvedt says that this debate actually brought two kind of responses. One group of Marxist who gave primacy to that of the economic dimension, the other group of scholars, the anti-caste scholars, the radical scholars, who gave the cultural and social realm more importance by not giving adequate attention to the economic sphere. Paradoxically, the influence of Marxism on anti-caste trend was this to widen divisions rather than lead to an integrated theory of accompanying economic, political and cultural factors.

These were separated. That is a very, very important and maybe a tragic development that happened in the Indian context. Activists theorized about caste and took class for granted. Phule himself had no theory of economic development or changes in modes of production as part of his overall analysis. But Ambedkar and his contemporaries also developed little of an independent economic analysis. They took from Marxism a broad economic radicalism and Ambedkar himself wrote considerably on financial issues, but little of this was integrated into the social historical interpretation of the caste system, which was treated as an altogether independent field of analysis.

So, these are Gail Omvedt's observations about how various scholars including Phule

and Ambedkar tried to integrate the or tried or they failed in integrating a proper Marxian economic based analysis with that of the other factors like caste and culture and politics and other things. The equation of caste, class or base and superstructure also held when new Marxist thinking on caste emerged in the 1970s in the face of the challenge from a renewed Dalit and anti-caste movement. This again took the form of reasserting the importance of caste as a cultural ideological factor. So, this was a time when a lot of new Dalit movement came into picture. They questioned this whole importance of Brahmanical hegemony.

They questioned the importance of purity. So, the whole discussion revolved around the cultural, the social realm in the realm of values and practices and culture rather than looking at how economic conditions and economic structures either perpetuated or gave birth to this kind of situation. If the Naxalite trend in India seemed the most ready by 1980s at least to pay attention to the social reality of caste, this was in part because Maoist framework of contradictions could allow an understanding which saw cultural or political factors as at times playing the leading role in a contradiction. So, the Maoist rebellion was heavily influenced by the cultural revolution of Mao Tse Tung in China, and they were forced to kind of acknowledge the realm of culture in Indian society and culture in these all questions of creating contradictions and ultimate revolution. Similarly, Althusserian influence of academic Marxist could stimulate a view of the superstructure including caste in India as dominant if not determinate in pre-capitalist society. So, other developments like say Althusser's development or Frankfurt School and then maybe Gramsci might be too early then.

But there was a kind of a considerable revision in the Marxian understanding of base and superstructure. So, base was no longer dismissed as kind of merely a function of the caste, function of the base. Other developments like Althusser's development or Frankfurt school, may be Gramsci might be too early then, but there was a considerable revision among the Marxian understanding of base and superstructure. So, base was no longer dismissed as kind of merely a function of the caste, function of the base. Superstructure was never seen as a mere consequence of the economic relation. Superstructure was seen also as quite influential capable of exerting influence on the basis. This led to an analysis which argued that in pre-colonial Indian society there were unique features of the structuring of economic relations as a result of caste with jajmani relations being a central feature.

'In caste feudal society' this caste and class were interwoven while in contrast in the capitalist mode of production economic classes and caste could be seen as separating themselves from each other. So, this kind of an argument, this kind of a very important integration of a revised Marxist framework with that of caste analysis brings in very



fascinating ideas. So, this led to the analysis which argued that in pre-colonial Indian society there were unique features of the structuring of economic relations as a result of caste with *jajmani* relations being a central feature. So, *Jajmani* relations I hope you are familiar with it.

We will, we have already discussed when we discussed M. N. Srinivas and his arguments there. So, in most of the villages the village economy revolves around the kind of a relation between a Jajman who could be a landowning caste and his servant caste, his service caste. So, mostly either a dominant caste person will be the Jajman and a landowner and a host of other caste in the service sectors, service caste would be kind of there would be permanently attached to this particular caste group or particular family. So, this particular system you know the Jajmani system was seen as a central feature because it is a system which has very specific caste implication and it is also a system which has very specific implications of mode of production. Here the entire land is owned by agricultural caste or the Jajman and the service caste are dependent on them and the remuneration is mostly in kind.

This create class and caste involvement while in contrast in the capitalist mode of production economic classes and caste could be seen as separating themselves from each other. So, in the pre capitalist era the economic system was a combination of both class as well as caste relations and that scenario changes with the introduction of capitalist system and the advancement in forms of production. However, these revisionist attempts also took for granted the basis of class or economic theories of Marxism including the analysis of the capitalist mode of production and the Stalinist five stage theories of history, primitive feminism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and socialism simply identifying caste as the super structure of feudal society. But even these theories according to Gail Omvedt were quite mechanical in their character because they were again using a framework that were available or that were developed by scholars in the west to impose on the Indian scenario. They accepted the identification of the proletariat as vanguard and the peasantry as basically a backward feudal class designed to disintegrate or differentiate under capitalism into a basically proletarianized agricultural laborer, poor peasant class and basically bourgeoisie rich peasant capitalist farmer class.

So, this is a larger debate about what is the kind of a mode of production that exist in India. And you know there are this Marxian argument Karl Marx wrote about Asiatic mode of production as a very unique kind of production that exist in Asiatic societies and that created lot of debate in 1960s between say sociologists and historians of Marxist orientation about whether how do we characterize Indian agriculture system. Are they feudal, are they capitalist, are they in between? So, all those debates kind of comes into picture during this particular time. They accepted the notion that not only socialism but

also capitalism laid a basis in the forces and relations of production for eradicating caste relations. Thus, they tended to argue that while caste is an important superstructural feature of capitalist society, important in the sense of requiring specific struggles to abolish it, a position that differentiates them from the more traditional Marxist, its main function is to exercise a retarding role on the development of class struggle.

So, this was again of a conclusion that they argued that the caste might be an important element in the superstructural feature of capitalist system. It has a function to do and the function is to exercise a retarding role in the development of class. So, this as a kind of a kind of a compromise understanding or a kind of an understanding that these scholars reach after considerable discussions and consultations. Within the new Dalit and anti-caste movement itself attempts to present a combined class-caste approach gained prominence after 1970s. An important recent version is that of Sharad Patil who has put forward a combined approach based on what he claims, sorry, Sharad Patil claims is a new methodology of Marxism-Phule-Ambedkarism which focuses not on caste as ideological system but on Jatis as entities arguing that in pre-capitalist societies Jatis themselves were basic units of production and exploitation.

So, instead of looking at Jati as symbolically constituted group of people, he argues that the Jatis were, has to be understood on the basis of the specific economic function that they do. In this approach caste conflict or Jati sankarsh is seen as being equivalent to class conflict, not simply a distraction or obstacle but to the real struggle and progressive in the sense of a fight against the basic exploitation of the system. So, any caste conflict has to be seen as a class struggle. So, Shard Patil is of the opinion that the caste has to be understood as a specific class who have, who engage in specific economic activities and who are governed by specific economic orientations. Patil also identified caste with feudalism and argued that following the British conquest, class relations associated with capitalism came into existence so that a compounded class caste struggle is necessary today.

So, that is a kind of a prognosis that he puts forward. A major problem with this approach is that even in pre-British society, caste Jatis were only superficially more concrete than class. It is very important argument that you that the castes were not the kind of very specific empirical categories, but it was the sub-castes. It is true that the classes cannot be simply identified in pre-British India, but neither did or do Jatis exist as a solid and determinable social unit. As many anthropologists have pointed out, sub-castes were the real units of endogamy and interaction, while the broader Jatis was often a category or identity rather than an actual existing group. So, this is again a very, very interesting argument because in the real everyday life, it is not the Varna, it is not even the Jatis, but it is the sub-caste, which is geographically bound, is the one which actually

functions as the actual unit of interaction.

A particular caste gets married and will treat other people are equal and same only if they belong to the same sub-caste. Further, the notion of Jati Sankarsh does not answer the question, which were the Jatis in struggle, which were the fundamental exploiters and which exploited. This is not so simple. Brahmins might easily be identified as exploiters. Dalits and Shudra service caste as exploited, but what about Kunbis, Kapu, Vokkaligas? Were they exploited or exploiters? Were they as dominant caste in village exploiting Dalits and Artisans or were they an exploited peasantry? Because this brings in a lot more complexity about Indian society because many the easy division between exploiter and exploited is not possible in the Indian context because quite a lot of intermediary castes who were the landowners were Shudras.

They were not the upper caste Brahmins or Vaishyas, they were the Shudras. So, this binary about who is an exploiter and who is an exploited was not easy to identify. Sharad Patils methodology, however much it is elaborated into a compelling account of ancient Indian history has not even attempted to pose this question, let alone answer it, nor has it provided an obvious logic for his historical periodization. Now, this the remaining part is Gail Omvedt's own attempt to theorize it and that we will take it up in the coming class, coming session. We will wind up now. See you in the coming class. Thank you.