

# India: The Struggle Against Caste Oppression Is a Vital Battleground for Indian Democracy

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**For several generations, India's Dalits and other oppressed groups have fought for equal rights against upper-caste domination. The history of their courageous struggles can inspire resistance against Narendra Modi's Hindutva repression today.**

As it marks its seventy-fifth year of independence, India is enduring an authoritarian turn which has ruptured the country's foundational claims to secularist diversity and democracy. Since Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014, there has been an increase in religious and caste-based violence, coupled with state repression against human rights advocates, intellectuals, and journalists.

With the Hindutva far-right movement extending its reach across many branches of state power, the BJP seeks to transform India into a "Hindu Rashtra" — a religious supremacist state. Having already promoted overt discrimination and incited deadly riots, some Hindutva leaders have even advocated killing millions of Muslims, raising the alarm of global experts on genocide.

At the same time, India has also witnessed an inspiring surge of popular movements that have challenged BJP policies targeting the citizenship of India's Muslim citizens, threatening the rights of caste-oppressed communities, and infringing on the livelihoods of farmers. As we move through the 2020s, the memories and lessons of previous eras echo across each generation, giving us precious resources of wisdom and hope.

## Generations of Struggle

Previous generations also fought against the authoritarianism of their times. My grandfather, Babuji Patankar, was a leader in the militant anti-colonial movement in the 1940s, who went into hiding to evade arrest. My father, Bharat Patankar, an anti-caste and labor organizer, also had to go underground during the 1970s' "Emergency" declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

In 1942, anti-colonial leaders launched a "Quit India" movement against the British Raj, inspiring millions of ordinary people to mobilize across what are now the states of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. This historic mass movement took on a range of nonviolent and militant forms, with some strands waging armed self-defense and guerrilla activities.

One key front was the mass-based Prati Sarkar in what is now India's Maharashtra state. This "parallel government" fought British rule, while also building up alternative institutions to fight injustices within South Asian society. These included the *nyayadan mandals* or people's courts, to combat discrimination and settle land disputes.

Prati Sarkar was not only an anti-colonial project. It was an interreligious, anti-exploitation, and anti-caste force whose popular participants dreamed of freedom in a way that would extend beyond independence from Britain. They centered peasants and workers, the Dalit and Bahun caste-

oppressed communities, and women — which would all be majority constituencies in the new republic, with each pursuing “independence” in their own right within India’s socioeconomic order.

It was through Prati Sarkar that my grandparents, Babuji and Indumati “Indu” Patankar, met and fell in love. Indu had been influenced by her father, Dinkarrao Nikam, who had been active in the freedom movement since the 1930s and served jail time for it. Since the age of twelve, Indu had participated in the Seva Dal, the grassroots front of the Indian National Congress. She supported freedom movement leaders staying at her home and transmitted coded messages between incarcerated activists and their comrades on the outside.

In 1942, when Indu was sixteen, she left her parental home and joined the Quit India movement, organizing women across Maharashtra. As she later recalled to her son:

Every drop of blood in my body was dancing for this struggle. I wanted freedom for my country, and then communism. It was necessary for every youth in this country to dedicate their whole life to achieve this. I left home burning with these thoughts.

By 1943, Indu started taking part in the Prati Sarkar, transporting pistols and revolvers. This is where she met Babuji, the only son of a landless migrant laborer, who had also left home to give his life to the freedom movement. They got married in 1946.

### **A Palace on a Dungheap**

After India’s independence in 1947, Congress prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s brand of “socialism” did involve enacting meaningful land reforms and antidiscrimination policies, pushed by the rising tide of popular expectations that Quit India had stirred up. Yet the Dalit anti-caste leader B. R. Ambedkar warned that the new country was entering into a “life of contradictions”:

In politics we will have equality, and in social and economic life we will have inequality . . . if we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril.

Ambedkar tried to help reshape the footing on which the Indian republic was established, serving as lead author of the new constitution of 1950, and as India’s first minister of law and justice. But he suffered a key defeat, failing to pass a progressive version of the Hindu Code bill, which sought to abolish barriers to intercaste marriage and to enshrine property and family rights for women. Despite the progressive momentum of the times, pro-caste, pro-Brahminist leaders successfully undermined these reforms.

Resigning in protest, Ambedkar lamented:

To leave inequality between class and class, between sex and sex, which is the soul of Hindu society untouched, and to go on passing legislation relating to economic problems, is to make a farce of our Constitution and to build a palace on a dung heap.

Decades later, my mother, Gail Omvedt, became a leading scholar of Ambedkar’s life and legacy. Indumati Patankar would feel his words reverberate, as she led a movement of abandoned women to win their own economic rights in Maharashtra state.

From the 1940s and into the 1950s, Indu and Babuji continued their grassroots politics, while navigating their movement’s ties with a constantly shifting landscape of diverse socialist, communist, and left-wing formations. In 1949, Indu gave birth to their son, Bharat. Then, in 1952, Babuji was disappeared by armed men who took him away while he was plowing the fields, never to be found again. According to their community’s accounts, Babuji was probably killed by people in

connivance with the new political-economic elites who saw his leadership as a threat to their new order.

## **Incomplete Dreams**

Faced with this shattering loss at the age of twenty-seven, Indu persevered. She continued her activism while single-handedly taking care of her elderly in-laws and raising her infant son. Writing in her diary in 1958, she addressed her lost husband:

When I stare at your photo for a long time, it feels like you are here in person. I talk and laugh with you. Will you ever return? So many of our dreams remain incomplete. You left in the middle of this game, and left all responsibility to me. But I am determined to take our dreams forward. I will continue to fight against oppression. Yet there are still so many times when I think of you, when I feel that I don't want to live.

Just as her maternal home in Indoli village had been a center of political activity, now her home in Kasegaon became a social movement center and a refuge for activists. She was a dynamic organizer in women's and farmer-labor movements from the 1950s until the 2010s. Indu also became a leading educator, mentoring a new generation of women to become independent thinkers and feminists in their own way. Using the suffix for "big sister," many thousands of people across dozens of villages affectionately knew her as "Indutai."

Indutai and Babuji's son, Bharat, came of age shaped by the death of his father, the resilience of his mother, and the influence of his "movement uncles and aunts." By the 1960s and '70s, the radical fervor of his generation was echoing all across the world. Young people in India grappled with new dreams to transform their society, including novel formations such as the Dalit Panther Party, which was founded in 1972.

By the time he was in his twenties, Bharat had joined the struggle with full enthusiasm. Bharat and his friends formed a group called Magowa ("Search") which promised to "examine everything, even Marxism itself, under a microscope." In a time of crisis for India's parliamentary left as well as conflict between Maoist rebellion and the state repression it faced, Magowa sought to break from some left-wing orthodoxies, while also building on the rich heritage of intersecting freedom struggles.

Gail Omvedt found her own voice, first in the heartland of the Black Panthers, and then in that of the Dalit Panthers. As an American in her twenties, she began visiting India in the 1960s to study South Asia's anti-caste traditions. Gail also came from an intergenerational legacy of social justice workers. Her grandfather August Omtvedt was a local and state legislator in Minnesota as part of the Socialist and Farmer-Labor Parties.

During her college days in Berkeley, Gail found herself swept up in the protest politics of antiwar, anti-racist, and feminist movements. This was a Bay Area culture animated by the free speech movement and the Black Panther Party. Gail's formative period was grounded in a vision of solidarity centered upon black communities and Vietnamese people facing the US war machine.

By the 1970s, Gail had settled down in India, taking up the parallel causes of that context. Braiding scholarship and activism, she threw herself into Ambedkarite and feminist movement-building. This is when my parents met and fell in love. Both were shaped by the urgencies of their time, to make social transformation their life-long commitment. As Gail wrote to Bharat in 1976, soon after their marriage:

All of my life I have longed for someone who could really understand me, my hopes, my dreams. It's

simply unbelievable to feel that I've found someone, that we've found each other, because you have wanted the same thing . . . the only thing is a shadow of a fear about our future, because with people like us, doing the things that we are doing to bring about a better world, there is no guarantee that the worst won't happen. We deserve (everyone deserves!) fifty years together, and yet perhaps anytime something could happen. That occasionally frightens me still.

For his part, the untimely widowing of Bharat's mother continued to haunt and shape his own perspective.

## **Revolutionary Love**

New social movements flourished in the 1970s, during and after the repressive Emergency. Despite having studied medicine, Bharat decided to make social movements his life's work instead. As part of Magowa, he worked with Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi farmers and labor movements, from urban Mumbai to rural Maharashtra.

For those who came from rural and lower-caste backgrounds, the caste-class struggle was central and existential. They rejected the tendency of certain "orthodox" Marxists to reduce caste-based concerns to the primacy of class alone. Amid a flurry of travel and struggle, Bharat wrote to Gail in 1979: "Dearest Gilu — To the revolutionary love of toilers, Dalits, and women!"

He surveyed the terrain. "There were marches organized by Dalit Panthers," as well as "more incidents of clashes between landlords and agricultural laborers." "Landlords are starting armed attacks against the Adivasis," while "people are countering strongly against atrocities on Dalits," and "forming a united front of all left and Dalit people." Throughout my childhood, as I was raised by Indutai, Gail, and Bharat, each was often traveling separately for their own research and activist work, apart from each other, yet bound together by these written correspondences.

In 1980, Magowa activists founded the Shramik Mukti Dal (Toilers' Liberation League or SMD), a mass organization with a strong working-class base and a vision which combined the fights for class, caste, and gender justice. SMD aimed to synthesize the ideas of Karl Marx with those of anti-caste and feminist thinkers such as Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, and B. R. Ambedkar. Bharat became an organizer in the historic Bombay Textile Strike of 1982, when a quarter of a million workers shut down dozens of mills, in a campaign for better wages and working conditions.

The failure of that strike had long-term repercussions for the livelihoods of tens of millions of workers. The "liberalization" of Indian labor law undermined the power of trade unions as a force for working-class self-organization. As textile mills closed and workers lost their jobs, many of them migrated back to their rural homes. Bharat's SMD organizing accompanied and shifted along with them. He focused on urgent rural struggles over land and water, while envisioning alternative models and dreams for a transformed economy and ecology.

## **Carrying the Torch**

From the 1980s to the 2010s, the organizing work of Bharat, Gail, and Indutai continued as SMD built its popular base across Maharashtra, India's second most populous state, with a population of over one hundred million. Over the last forty years, SMD has been fostering the collective participation of the most marginalized sections of society. These community movements have taken up the right to natural resources like water, land, and wind; anti-caste causes across familial, religious, and political fronts; and gender justice and livelihood struggles centered upon landless women and laborers.

Gail and Indumati became leading voices in India's women's movement as activists and intellectuals.

One of Indumati's trailblazing contributions was her leadership in building a fierce movement among women abandoned by the families of their husbands, to build their own collective community, and to struggle for the right to land and livelihood. Indumati passed away in 2017, while Gail left us in 2021. A *New York Times* [obituary](#) of Gail described her as "a leader in the country's feminist movement" who had "championed the cause of India's marginalized communities." It credited SMD with "launching some of the largest organized mass movements against injustices experienced by workers in rural India."

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Dalit Panthers, which took inspiration from America's Black Panthers. Founded twenty-five years after India's independence by young Dalit writers and activists, the Panthers questioned the celebrations of freedom that were taking place at the time, even as poor and caste-oppressed communities continued to face brutality and exploitation across rural and urban India. They dreamed of a radically different society, remade by struggle from below.

Today, we face a diametrically opposed dream of a radically different society, with an attempt to remake society through Hindutva violence and repression, as manipulated by elites from above. In 2022, as India celebrates seventy-five years of independence, the history and politics of its peoples remain a deeply contested battleground, within the subcontinent and across its globe-spanning diaspora. An elite-led BJP agenda is not only trying to entrench itself across all levels of state and society. It is also trying to erase the popular memory and rich legacy of South Asia's progressive anti-colonial freedom fighters.

With Indian and South Asian communities migrating across the world, the ideologies of Hindutva and Brahmanist casteism have traveled along with them. But so too have the liberatory traditions of the anti-caste, left-wing, and feminist South Asian heritage. Rooting myself in these traditions and today's progressive diasporic communities, I am committed to taking forward the dreams led by anti-caste and Dalit feminists, as part of a global solidarity which binds together each and every liberation struggle.

Those who carry the torch of Quit India and Prati Sarkar — those who are concerned with the livelihoods of the Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi majority and the working-class majority — will have to preserve the stories and lessons of this intergenerational heritage. If today's authoritarian nightmares are to be countered with the greater power of democratic dreams, we will need a critical mass of people to embrace a historic commitment of their own — as the freedom fighter Indutai said, with "every drop of blood in my body dancing for this struggle."

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