

2007
DURGABAI DESHMUKH MEMORIAL LECTURE



Dr. Durgabai Deshmukh
1909-1981

**FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS FOR THE
NAUTCH GIRLS OF PURULIA**

Mahasweta Devi

COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
AND
INDIA INTERNATIONAL CENTRE

DURGABAI DESHMUKH

A brief life-sketch

PERSONAL

Date of Birth : 15 July 1909 (At Rajamundry, Andhra Pradesh)
Maiden Name : Durgabai Rao
Date of Death : 09 May 1981 (at Hyderabad)
First Marriage : At the age of eight (separated after three years)
Marriage with : 22 Jan. 1953
Dr. C. D. Deshmukh

ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS

1939 : M. A. Political Science, Andhra University
1941 : B.L., Madras University

SOCIO-POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

1921 : Protest against status of Devadasis,
Muslim women and widows
1930 : Salt Satyagrah Movement
1931-33 : Imprisoned thrice, Insisted on staying in class C
1946 : Member of Parliament

IMPORTANT INSTITUTIONS BUILT

1922 : Balika Hindi Pathasala Kakinada (at the age of 13)
1937 : Andhra Mahila Sabha, Chennai/Hyderabad
1944 : Blind Relief Association of Delhi, New Delhi
1953 : Central Social Welfare Board, New Delhi
1964 : Council for Social Development, New Delhi

AWARDS/DISTINCTIONS

1946 : Member, Constituent Assembly
1952 : Member, Planning Commission
1963 : Doctorate *honoris causa*, Andhra University
1971 : Nehru Literacy Award
1975 : Padma Vibhushan
(Dr. C. D. Deshmukh also received this award
in the same year)

INTERNATIONAL AWARDS

1978 : Paul G. Hoffman Award
1978 : UNESCO Award

COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

The Council for Social Development (CSD) started as an informal group of social scientists, social workers and planners committed to the national ideals of social justice and equality. Late Dr. (Smt.) Durgabai Deshmukh, the guiding spirit of the CSD, organised a Study Group of Social Welfare to review the situation in the developing countries and suggest ways for promoting social development. The CSD was given a formal status as an affiliate of the India International Centre (IIC), New Delhi, in 1964. When the activities of the CSD increased, the Board of Trustees of the IIC decided that the CSD should be an autonomous organisation and accordingly the CSD was registered in 1970 under the Societies Registration Act of 1860. It, however, continues to have a special relationship with the IIC.

The main objectives of the CSD are :

- (a) to undertake and/or promote the study of social development;
- (b) in furtherance of that end, to undertake studies;
 - (i) in the national/regional policies of social development;
 - (ii) in the process of planning in social development; and
 - (iii) in the interaction between social and economic development at various stages of national growth in developing countries; and
- (c) in particular to plan and promote;
 - (i) studies in techniques of social planning and programming;
 - (ii) inter-disciplinary research;
 - (iii) socio-economic/occupational surveys;
 - (iv) motivation for social change; and
 - (v) socio-psychological studies in rural areas.

DURGABAI DESHMUKH MEMORIAL LECTURE SERIES

Year	Speaker	Topic
1992	Dr. Suma Chitnis	The Institutionalisation of Social Purpose*
1993	Dr. Vina Majumdar	Women and the Political Process*
1994	Dr. Karan Singh	Population and Social Development in India
1995	Dr. Kiran Bedi	Concept of Management in Government
1996	Dr. Vandana Shiva	Trading our lives away: Free trade, women and ecology*
1997	Ms. Leila Seth	The Girl Child and Social Development*
1998	Swami Agnivesh	Towards a Spiritual Society* (text in Hindi)
1999	Justice Shri M. N. Venkatachaliah	Human Rights and Women in India
2000	Professor Leela Dube	Social Development and Social Research*
2001	Dr. N. H. Antia	Women and Health*
2002	Professor Mushirul Hasan	Islam, Culture & Politics: Awadh society in 20th Century*
2003	Dr. Pushpa M. Bhargava	The promise and problems of today's Biology and Biotechnology and their applications*
2004	Professor Anil Sadgopal	Globalisation : Demystifying its Knowledge Agenda for India's Education Policy*
2005	Professor Ram Dayal Munda	Globalisation and the Challenges of Tribal Development*
2006	Aruna Roy	Democracy at Work*

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by

Mahasweta Devi

15 July 2007



COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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Mahasweta Devi

A brief life-sketch

Born into a middle-class Bengali family on 1926 in the city of Dacca (now in Bangladesh), Mahasweta Devi was admitted into Santiniketan where Rabindranath Tagore had established a school system, later forming part of Visva-Bharati University. She graduated from the University of Calcutta. Her family shifted to India during the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. She later earned a M.A. degree in English from the Visva-Bharati University as well.

In 1964, she began teaching at Bijoygarh College (an affiliated college of the University of Calcutta system). During those days, Bijoygarh College was an institution for working class women students. Also during that period, she also worked as a journalist and as a creative writer. Recently, she is more famous for her work related to the study of the rural tribal communities of West Bengal, women and dalits. She is also an activist who is dedicated to the struggles of tribal people in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. In her elaborate Bengali fiction, she often depicts the brutal oppression of tribal peoples and the untouchables by potent, authoritarian upper-caste landlords, lenders, and venal government officials.

Mahasweta Devi has recently been spearheading the movement against the industrial policy of the government of West Bengal, the state of her domicile. Specifically, she has stridently criticized confiscation of large tracts of fertile agricultural land from farmers by the government and ceding the land to industrial houses at throwaway prices. She has connected the policy to the commercialization of Santiniketan of Rabindranath Tagore, where she spent her formative years. Her lead resulted in a number of intellectuals, artists, writers and theatre workers join in protesting the controversial policy and particularly its implementation in Singur and Nandigram.

Works

- *Hajar Churashir Ma* (No. 1084's Mother, 1975)
- *Aranyer Adhikar* (The Occupation of the Forest, 1977)
- *Agnigarbha* (Womb of Fire, 1978)
- *Choti Munda evam Tar Tir* (Choti Munda and His Arrow, 1980)
- *Breast-Giver* [1]
- *Imaginary Maps, 1995* (translated by Gayatri Spivak) London & New York. Routledge
- *Dhowli* (Short Story)
- *Breast Giver* (1998)
- *Dust on the Road*
- *Our Non-Veg Cow*
- *Bashai Tudu*
- *Titu Mir*

Major awards

- **Padma Vibhushan** - the second highest civilian award from the Government of India in the year 2006.
- **Ramon Magsaysay Award** - for journalism, literature and creative communication in 1997.
- **Jnanpith Award** - the highest literary award from the Sahitya Akademi.

FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS FOR THE NAUTCH GIRLS OF PURULIA

Mahasweta Devi

THE NACHNIS OF PURULIA

To “naach” is to dance, and “Nachnis” are dancers. Very little is known about them though I have been to Purulia many times. In December '06, I went to Purulia on my way to Nandigram. The Sabar tribals had come. It was a “Sabar Mela”. A festival just like in the yester-years!

The village artists had gathered on the earthen platform. The “Nat” artistes came with their martial dances; the Sabar with their ‘Chho” dances; it was here that I saw a live performance by the “nachni” girls for the first time.

Later, I came to know that the Nachnis of Purulia, a very marginalized and much abused community, have formed their own organisation in order to get their fundamental human rights, mainly from the society they live in and also from the system. I use the word “system” in a very broad sense. Here is the address of the newly formed Nachni organization:-

Secretary: Indrani Devi
MANDHUM LOKSANSKRITI AND NACHNI SAMSAD
SHABARI
MUNSEF DANGA
PURULIA 723101
PHONE: 9732114569

Not a lot is known about the origin of the Nachni dance. According to Dipak Barpanda of ‘Durbar”, a leading sex workers organization, the custom of keeping dancing and singing girls can be traced to 12th Century Bengal. But today the “Nachni” dancers, and the “Jhumur” singers are found mainly in Purulia.

The origin of Nachni Dance can be traced to Ayodhya Prasad Singdeo of the small feudal estate of Baghmundi, and his descendants. After the “Permanent Settlement — 1793” was enacted by Lord Cornwallis. Baghmundi, at Purulia was one of the many feudatory estates.

According to Subodh Basu Roy, a rare scholar and a Purulia based field researcher, Nachni dance is an illogical outcome of the tradition of tribal folk-dancers. To the tribals, dance and song are part of their life.

Ajodhyaprasad Singdeo was a patron of dance and song. He composed songs, encouraged musicians and dance-girls. This type of song, later became known as the 'Jhumur' and the dance-girls themselves started to be called Nachnis. In short a Nachni is a dance-girl.

I once saw Postobala, a Nachni, dancing on our Samstis' stage in Purulia. She danced and sang. Some male singers joined her in singing. Postobala's lyrics repeatedly referred to the indifference of the so-called "bhadralog" dominated society.

This brings me to the reality of a Nachni life. These dancing and singing girls do not choose this profession on their own. I do not know enough about the "Devdasis" of the South but whereas the Devdasis dance, the nachnis dance and sing.

But the truth is, the Nachnis in Purulia come from the Dalit and tribal society. They are sold in their childhood to the Rasiks or their masters. Purulia is a very neglected and poverty-stricken part of West Bengal. It continues to remain a target of the state government's cruel indifference. Purulia is the district where the Sabar, or Kheria Sabar tribals have been killed by non-tribals and the police for being once *notified* by the British as born criminals (1871). In 1952 the Government of India declared them as *denotified*. Since the 1980's I have fought against this stigma together with activists like G N Devy of Baroda and many others.

For the last 30 years, my State Government has deliberately failed to do even the minimum for the people of the state. No roads, no electricity, no doctors in Purulia. In fact, they do nothing at all for the people. Since "Sarba Shiksha Avijan" is a part of the package of failures, the Nachni's have always been grossly neglected. Many of them are sold to the purchasers as their parents are too poor to feed them. That is why they are sold in childhood. In some cases, parents sell them as husbands demand money. According to D. Barpanda, there is major trafficking in women. Those unfortunates also get sold.

In Purulia, the different branches of the State Government are absolutely non-functional. Only two days ago, one Sabar tribal died of starvation in Amlasol in West Medinipur, and in North Bengal tea gardens labourers die in the

hundreds. The Panchayat system is a total failure here. And girls are purchased like commodities by men in Purulia.

The purchaser is known as the “Rasik”. A Nachni is a commodity, so she remains perpetually bound to him. Whatever she earns from singing and dancing, goes to her Rasik.

The Rasik’s marry and beget children. The Nachni has to support the Rasik and his family.

No one eats food cooked by a Nachni. Sri Barpanda writes that the Nachni girls are treated like untouchables. The Rasik’s wife and her children do not allow the Nachni to enter the kitchen.

A Rasik can keep more than one Nachni, but a Nachni cannot leave one Rasik and live with another. Usually the Nachni, like a married woman, touches her forehead with vermilion, wears special bangles, the way the married wives do.

So, one can say that in the heart of West Bengal, a Left Front ruled state for 30 years, this cruel practice of purchasing a young girl, making her sing and dance to please her male clientele, take all her money and treat her like a pariah, goes on and on.

A Nachni’s life is, perhaps, tolerable, as long as her Rasik lives. But, after his death, a Nachni is neither cremated nor buried. Her legs are tied to a rope, dragged to a distance and thrown in the garbage heap.

Rajubala’s life story will drive the point home.

Kartik Jantubai, a weaver by caste was Rajubala’s Rasik.

He loved her so much, he did not marry.

Rajubala too, was very loyal to him.

When Kartik died. Rajubala was thrown out of the hut, I do not know by whom.

She left the village named Jugidi and went to Urmahat.

Here she sat under a Mowa tree and begged.

This is where she died in 2006.

Rajubala wanted to be cremated. Like a Hindu. This is what I learnt.

Instead, she was dragged to the nearby railway lines and left there.

According to Deepak Barpanda: The Nachni’s come usually from Dalit society. Because they are Dalits, their Rasiks and their clientele demean them. After all,

they are “lowly born.” The Nachni women sing and dance and earn. But they have no power to use the money. Their earnings go towards maintaining the families of their respective Rasiks. A Nachni is alright for sex. But she has no right to use the money she earns for herself.

Usually the Rasiks are from so-called upper classes. The Nachni’s are usually from poor Dalit homes. They are physically tortured too, that is why the Rasiks do not allow their daughters to become Nachni’s.

The Nachni, a woman earns, her Rasik, a man, keeps the money.

Butal Bala of BUNDU village had said, “The Rasiks do not let us rest once they get the money.”

The Rasiks get everything: money, the Nachni earns; the sex the Rasik enjoys.

Thanks to West Bengal’s 30 years long Left Front rule, abysmal negligence towards Purulia, the Nachni’s do not get any rights, social or human, ever.

The Nachni’s accept it too. Twenty year old Kajol thinks she is happy. Now she earns, as she is young. But she is loyal to her Rasik. Surely, the Rasik’s family will take care of her once she becomes old. Or so she thinks.

Is the Nachni song and dance ‘legitimate’ Art? I do not know.

To keep a Nachni is beneficial for a non-earning boy. Deepak mentions two cases:

1. Benoy Majhi (35), a graduate, from paramdi village of P.S. Bundu, Dt. Ranchi. He has kept Pushpa as his Nachni, so that Pushpa earns.
2. Not all Rasiks come from Scheduled Castes. Hrishikesh Mukherjee, a Brahmin, from village Jalthadi, P.S. Baghmundi, Dt. Purulia has kept Saraswati Singh as his Nachni.

Some Nachni women have achieved recognition. One might say, they forced the outside world to recognize and honour their talents. Sindhubala Devi received GOI’s “Lalan Puraskar” for her songs. Lalan was a great folk-singer and non-communal. Rabindranath Tagore admired Lalan as a peoples’ singer.

Malabati, a Nahni performed her Nachni dance on Republic Day in 1986 before an all-India audience.

Rajbala too was an artist of excellence. She performed Nachni dance in different cities of India.

Bimala Devi was acclaimed as a teacher-instructor in Nachni dance and Jhumur songs.

But name and fame could not help them fight the usual drudgeries of a Nachni's life.

All of them were reduced to a life of beggary and destitution. Rajbala died on the streets, Hajari begs from door to door on the streets of Manbazar, Purulia.

Now the jobless youth are becoming "manager Rasiks". They keep nachnis, give them shelter and food. Earn a lot by forcing Nachni's to go to places, dance and sing and earn. After a performance, the rural clientele pay. The Nachni receive nothing. No account is ever opened for a Nachni in a bank or a post office.

Here are the life-stories of some such Nachnis:

1. Keshavati is about 50. She is renowned as a skilled nachni, very popular with the audience. She comes from the village Charaikella. Her father Shatrughna Kalindi is a "dom", traditionally a Dalit.

Dalit women are, and always have been fighters and survivors,. In 1973 Keshavati along with the mother, elder sister and sisters' husband went to Rajkharswan to Rasik Bauri Bondhu Mahajato house. Keshavati wanted to be a Nachni. Hers is one of the rare instances. Hers was a self-chosen option. Not many avenues were open to her. Bauri Bondhu kept her as his Nachni, and she put her thumb impression on a blank sheet of paper. This happened in the year 1973. To Bauribondhu, Keshavati was his property. Then came Sreedhar Sharma, the assistant Stationmaster of Lotapahar Station, a friend of Bauribondhu, he had sympathy for Keshavati. Once Bauribondhu slapped Keshavati, she protested. Sreedhar offered to take her away. Keshavati left Bauribondhu, her Rasik and came to Sreedhar. This incident angered Bauribondhu. He filed a case in the court and lost.

But Sreedhar had a wife, a family. So Keshavati had to leave him. She became a Nachni of Dhiraj Mahato of Ratgidi village, district Charaikella. After Dhiraj's death she became the Nachni of Anand, Dhiraj's cousin. Anand is her Rasik. What is laudable is that he truly loved dance, and continues it. Her daughter

Meera was married to a Mahato youth of Dt. Chhapra (now Sean) of Bihar. This son-in-law died in an accident. Amidst all these ups and downs, Keshavati continues to dance. Meera's father-in-law Ram Iqbal Mahato respects her and says, "Dance is a performing art, why should she stop?"

Keshavati is really laudable. Truly liberated.

2. Malavati is 42. Her father Jagannath Karmakar is a small farmer from Kaki village, Dt. Mayurbhanj, Orissa. Jagannath had 4 daughters. The eldest one became a Nachni. Many Rasiks came to Jagannath's house.

Malavati wanted to be a Nachni and, at the age of 14, left with Bauribondhu Mahato, aged 60. Her father tried to stop her, but she had a mind of her own.

Bauribondhu came from the village Udalkham, P.S. Parsana, Dt. Paschim Singhbhum, St. Jharkhand.

Malavati was given dance and music lessons. She excelled in both. Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, saw her performance In 1986, on Republic Day. The Bihar State Government gave her an award. There are cassettes available of her songs.

Malavati's Rasik, Bauribondhu was a teacher and had a social conscience. Malavati learnt and practiced dance and music for eight years. Her Rasik arranged coaching lessons for her. His married wife Pelavati accepted Malavati, allowed her to help in the kitchen, attend to the guests and visitors. Pelavati is childless. Malavati has one daughter Sevati, who is a H.S. student, and a son Godadhar, Bauribondhu is dead. He has left his property to Malavati, Pelavati, Sevati and Godadhar. Bauribondhu's is an exceptional instance in the Rasik society.

3. Bimala is 60. From a Sardar family of village Amdiha, Dt. Bankura. She came to Raghunandan Kumar of village Amda, P.S. Arsa, Dt. Purulia. Bimala became a Nachni to Raghunandan. After Raghu's death his brother Gour became her Rasik.
4. Bimala is quite well known. She has performed at Panchkot Raj palace of Purulia, with the renowned singer Sindhubala. Bimala's songs are available in the cassettes she has made, Bimala and Raghunandan have one son, Amit Kumar, age 32. Bimala is respected in the family. Gour Kumar boasts, "We, in this family, do not look down upon the Nachni's."

5. Butan Bala is 42. Her father is Panchanan Lohar, an ironsmith. He lives in village Tetola, P.S. Sonahar, Dt. Purulia. At the age of 15, Butan eloped with Laxmicharan Singh Munda. Her present address is village-Tao, P.O. Bundu, Dt. Ranchi, St. Jharkhand, Butan has made some cassettes. She gets invitations for programmes throughout the year. Jharkhand State's Anti-Aids committee has asked Butan and her troupe to conduct Anti-Aids Awareness programmes. Butan supports the family of Laxmicharan, his wife Gouri and their three children. Butan's daughter has passed the Secondary Examination. Laxmicharan admits and thanks to Butan's earnings that he has a brick-built house and a car.
5. Saraswati is 42, from village Jathadi, P.O. Mathaforest, P.S. Baghmundi, Dt. Purulia. Her present address is Dhobghata, Purulia town. Khepu Singh purchased her as his Nachni when she was 12, and gave her training. Saraswati has performed in the open air "yatra" performances. There she met Hrishikesh Mukherjee. Mukherjee is a Brahmin, Saraswati is, by birth, a Bhumi tribal with the surname Singh-Sardr. Saraswati lives with Hrishikesh. She has 3 daughters. All married. One has died after marriage.
Now Saraswati and Hrishikesh compose and sing songs of resistance.
6. Pushpa, age 30, is a daughter of Sukhram Karmakar, village Limba, P.S. Tamar, Dt. Purulia. Benoy Majhi, a graduate from village Paromdi, Dt. Ranchi, aged 30 asked Sukhram for Pushpa to keep her as Nachni. Sukhram agreed. Pushpa became a Nachni at the age of 25. Benoy and Pushpa live together. Benoy is still unmarried. They have a child.
7. Fulan, age 45, is from village Bonkati, P.O. Barabhum, P.S. Barabazar, Dt. Purulia. She fell in love with Gobindo Mahato of the same village. They went to the court and registered the marriage. Then Fulan underwent coaching and started earning, Gobindo and Latika, his wife, have three children, Fulan and Gobindo have three. Fulan, works in the fields when she does not have programmes.
8. Birola, 65, is from village Berali, P.O. Sirum, P.S. Ningri, Dt. Purulia. Her father is Kuka Lohar, an ironsmith from village Madhupur, P.S. Ningri, Dt. Purulia. Birola at 15, left with Lalmohan Singh Munda. Birola's father went with bow and arrow to teach Lalmohan a lesson. Birola faced the crowd and publicly declared that she would stay with Lalmohan, her Rasik. Lalmohan has subsequently died. Birola works as an agricultural labourer to support her two sons. Lalmohan had not married.

9. Chintamoni Singh Mura, 50, is from village Deoli, P.O. Atna, P.S. Baghmundi, Dt. Purulia. Her father Falari Mondal of village Ilu, P.S. Jhalda was a Rasik himself. Chintamoni, at the age of 12, fell in love with Rampada Singh Mura, and Rampada made Chintamoni his Nachni. Rampada arranged to have Chintamoni trained by the famous Jhumur singer, Abani Singh Deo. Rampada and his wife Sankari have five daughters. Chintamoni has one daughter. This daughter is now married.
10. Adarmoni, 65, joined her Rasik Bauribondhu Mahato and stayed with him for 10 years. Then they separated and Adarmoni joined Surat Mahato. Adarmoni is a renowned Jhumur singer. Her cassettes are available and she has sung in many languages, such as Bengali, Oriya, Panchparganya, Naghuri, Mundari and Santali.
11. Purnima, 45, is the daughter of a Purulia cycle rickshaw puller. Her father died when she was 6. Eventually she became a Nachni. Durgacharan Mahato is her Rasik. Durgacharan has two sons and one daughter by his wedded wife. Purnima is childless.

WHAT DID DURBAR DO ?

Durbar Mahila Samanoy Committee is doing unique work in West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhatisgarh to organize the sex workers fight for their rights.

They have organized the Purulia Nachnis to form their own organisation. I have given the address. The demands of the Nachnis are listed below.

1. Nachni dance and songs must be socially and officially recognized as art and the performers as artists.
2. A Nachni Academy must be established.
3. Their right to their earnings must be officially ensured.
4. The children born to Nachnis have right to the property the Rasiks make out of the Nachnis earnings. This right has to be recognised by the States.
5. The children born from Nachni-Rasik relationships have to have medical and educational benefits.
6. The hitherto practiced social ostracization towards Nachnis must be stopped by official legislation.
7. Each Nachni has to have a personal (or postal) bank account, a savings account, in her name.
8. The Nachnis must be given every benefit from Government Acts and Laws.

9. They must be given monthly pension when they retire.
10. Each Nachni, after her death, has to get a proper funeral according to her belief.

Deepak Barpanda concluded his statement like this:

The demand of the rights of the Nachni's is very much a part of the human right movement. One cannot isolate the Nachni's from the neighbouring society and judge them. Once, in the society, earning women were treated with contempt and suspicion. Times are changing. Once women who went out to earn were treated with mistrust. Now the scenario has changed. Now is the time to shake off the old taboos. The Nachnis earn, but they are not allowed to touch the money, since Rasiks live off them. 21st century is very much women's century. We have to work hard, very hard to get the Nachnis their legitimate rights. □