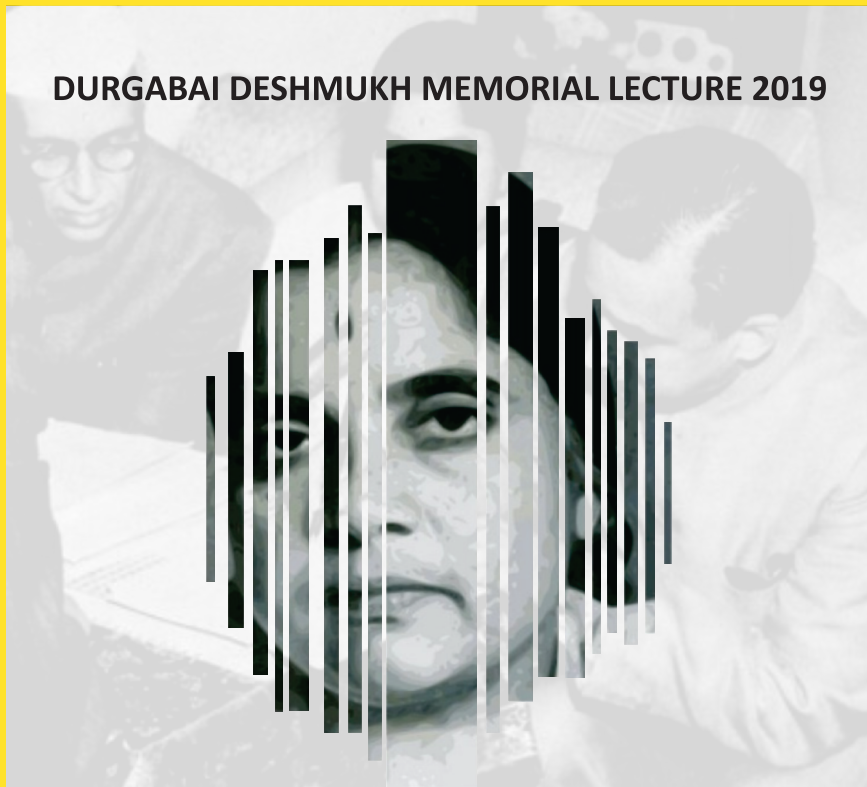


**DURGABAI DESHMUKH MEMORIAL LECTURE 2019**



# **THE HERITAGE & PROSPECTS OF DEMOCRACY**

**PROF. HIREN GOHAIN**

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Council for Social Development



India International Centre

# ABOUT CSD

CSD began its journey as an informal study group at the India International Centre in 1962 by a few prominent social workers and social scientists, under the leadership of the legendary freedom fighter and social worker Durgabai Deshmukh. It was registered as a society in 1970, with C.D. Deshmukh as President and Durgabai Deshmukh as Executive Chairperson and Honorary Director. A Southern Regional Centre (SRC) of CSD was set up in Hyderabad in 1967 by Durgabai Deshmukh which is currently funded by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and the government of Telangana. Eminent Educationists and representatives of public institutions constitute the CSD society which guides its programmes.

For over five decades, the Council for Social Development (CSD) has functioned as a non-profit, non-partisan, vibrant research and advocacy institution, engaged in the issues of social development, especially the welfare of the marginalised. Through its programmes of research, seminars, publications, capacity-building and other initiatives, CSD actively participates in policy discourses on social development in India. It pursues its vision by undertaking studies and advocacy activities in key areas such as development education, health, rural development, governance, human rights, and social justice. Its pioneering efforts have helped shape planning, policy and programme implementation and foster critical ideas approaches and strategies designed to bring about social change.

Durgabai Deshmukh Memorial Lecture-2019

The Heritage and Prospects of Democracy

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## Durgabai Deshmukh

Freedom fighter, social reformer, an indefatigable institution builder, member of the Constituent Assembly, the first woman-member of the Planning Commission, Durgabai Deshmukh's life was one of leadership and true empowerment. Born on July 15, 1909 in Rajahmundry in Andhra Pradesh, she was initiated into a life of politics and social reform early. At 12, she left school to protest against the imposition of English language education and later started the Balika Hindi Paathshala in Rajahmundry to promote Hindi education for girls. This was to be the nucleus of the future Andhra Mahila Sabha, the large social service organisation which laid the foundation of numerous educational institutions at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. A follower of Mahatma Gandhi, she joined the khadi movement, and participated in the Salt Satyagraha as part of the Civil Disobedience Movement for which she was imprisoned. After her release, she went on to acquire a law degree and practiced at the Madras Bar for a few years. In 1952, she married C.D. Deshmukh who went on to become India's first finance minister and later Governor of the Reserve Bank of India.

In 1958, she headed the National Committee on Women's Education, and formed the Andhra Women's Association. As member of the Planning Commission, she mustered support for a national policy on social welfare which resulted in the establishment of the Central Social Welfare Board. As the Board's first chairperson, she mobilised a large number of voluntary organisations to carry out its programmes aimed at the education, training and rehabilitation of needy women, children and the handicapped. Alongside, she compiled the Encyclopedia of Social Work in India, still an indispensable reference tool for researchers.

Durgabai Deshmukh was instrumental in setting up the Council for Social Development, Durgabai Deshmukh Hospital, Sri Venkateswara College, among the other institutions. In recognition of her outstanding efforts to spread literacy and social change she was awarded the Paul

G. Hoffman Award, the Nehru Literacy Award and the UNESCO Peace Award. Along with her husband, she received the Padma Vibhushan in 1975 for contribution to public affairs and social work. But beyond the accolades, Durgabai Deshmukh's true legacy lies in her spirit of sacrifice and unwavering commitment to social change.



## The Heritage and Prospects of Democracy

While Abraham Lincoln's words, "Government of the people, by the people, for the people", serving so long as a pithy definition of democracy, sound today like tired old cliches, a closer look at their historical political context can still bring to life their concrete substance and continuing relevance.

Spoken during the height of the American Civil War, when the U.S. Government was engaged in a desperate conflict with a confederation of secessionist American states wedded to slavery, those words could not but have affirmed before the whole nation that it was a war for vindication of human liberty embracing a far larger number of people than the founding fathers of the United States of America, many of whom were slave-owners, had in their minds.

But Lincoln was also convinced of a continuity with that past, not a break. This ought to make it clear that democracy is an ever-expanding idea and project, which had its origin in the Enlightenment dream of universal human liberation. Apart from securing certain inalienable rights of the citizen, democratic states today by and large accept an obligation for rendering certain services like health-care and education to citizens at state expense—more as their

entitlements than charity. They are also committed to ensure a living age to all citizen. Equality is no longer interpreted hereby as equality under the law, but also as equal opportunity to achieve the highest degree of freedom from constraint for free self-development—so that equality of citizens achieves its full meaning.

Thus the topic of today's lecture happens to be in consonance to the ideas cherished by the founder of this institution, Durgabai Deshmukh. A staunch Gandhian, she had taken to heart Gandhiji's message to the republic soon after India won independence—that now that political freedom had been won, it was time to dedicate ourselves to attainment of economic and social freedom of our people.

But these foundational ideas appear to be in peril today, owing perhaps to gradual loss of interest as well as unforeseen national and international challenges. Indeed there is an uneasy feeling among the public that our democracy is in of the midst of an unprecedented social and political crisis. It seems to have spread to confusion and conflict regarding the very meaning of democracy. To some it is no more than a political mechanism delivering majorities to a party or parties to do as they like with power thus obtained, heedless of any concern for consensus on programmes pursued. Then there are those who are sorry that fundamental civil rights and autonomy of institutions are in peril, while the nightmarish destitution and despair of labouring masses do not seem to affect them much. Still others are deeply concerned that a rational consensus on the need for debate, tolerance

of difference and debate, has suffered heavy erosion, giving rise to arbitrary and irrational exercise of power and increasingly frequent and furious mob violence on the flimsiest of pretexts. It appears to some that the very perception of values has changed, turning non-issues into occasions of deadly conflict. Will democracy meet a tragic end in the flame of a conflagration?

Throughout its history, it has become more and more obvious that democracy has not been a static and immutable ideal, but a dynamic and volatile enterprise, deriving its energies from turbulent social life and elemental conflict of social forces. Today, apart from empowerment of classes and the communities who were suppressed for centuries democracy is bound to address inextinguishable questions of justice in regard to gender, nationality, ethnic and religious entities, cultures and contrasting life-goals, in so far as this does not endanger the dynamic unity. It is also apparent that through such successive conflicts and turmoil, ideological and conceptual deposits have accumulated that are today inextricable from the broad meaning of democracy.

It is also an historically observable fact that in this perpetual conflict, there are moments of profound confusion and setbacks, when forces inimical to democracy have seized control of the state to advance their narrow and perverse interests, suppress the rights and claims of others, thus apparently undoing the work of centuries of struggle and sacrifice. Often an hegemonic, homogenous unity is forcibly imposed on all sections of society, to the peril of fundamental

rights to life and liberty. Such a danger had cast a monstrous shadow on democracy in Europe during the ascent of Fascism masquerading as hyper-nationalism. In such times reason seems to undergo an eclipse, and freedom is banished as enemy of a new avatar of nation-state under the guise of Fascism.

To accept such a view is to bid farewell to the ideal of equality and embrace inequality as a fact of life, install command rather than consent as the cement of public order, restore privilege and serious asymmetry in social and political power, reduce the individual to a cog in a mammoth political system serving a goal he or she had no role in choosing or deciding. Difference no longer generates concern for equal treatment and respect, but becomes a cause for suspicion and malignity. Such a contrary vision of human life and society rejects a dynamic view of history as opening up newer frontiers of human freedom but proposes an immutable state for a thousand years moving along the same, unchanging grooves. Often only a major social and political upsurge had dislodged such groups from power and returned society to the mission of pursuing a democratic vision.

Such a democratic vision had been mainly a product of Western societies and cultures, though all other societies had glimpses and impulses of similar vision at some time or other, Cultural uniqueness is sometimes invoked to promote cultural insularity to such a universal vision. The colonial empires of countries that had been the seed-bed of democracy seem to provide a pretext for rejection of democracy,

thanks to the exploitation and degradation of non-Western peoples they had carried out with gusto. But the expansion of democracy, apart from sparking fires of systematic and sustained resistance to colonial oppression, had also awoken sympathy and protests from sections of Western societies themselves. This had culminated briefly towards the end of the second World War in the famous discord between President Roosevelt of U.S.A and Prime Minister Churchill of Great Britain in regard to the future of colonies. Roosevelt had stood stoutly for freedom of those colonies. So did Stalin. Among major allies only Churchill opposed it.

Likewise the extension of the franchise in Western Countries, themselves had not been a result of quiet, peaceful increase in enlightenment. The ruling classes have always conceded right to vote to those excluded under tremendous pressure from below, as the Reform Bills of 1832 and 1867 proved. But it cannot be said that such extensions had been social accidents, not advances of reason. Until the labouring classes had attained sharp and mature rational powers to realize the importance of informed choice and a share of political power in general, the great majority of them were involved in blind resistance to tyranny and oppression. The demand for extension of the vote had been a revolutionary advance of reason.

How does this look like when applied to the fortunes of Indian democracy?

One of the most serious obstacles to progress of democracy in the country was its entrenched institution

and tradition of the caste-system. And a grave mistake of the icons of Indian enlightenment had been their conception of caste as a mere superstition, to be wiped out by social progress. But the stubborn fact is that social progress in India can follow only upon the complete abolition and elimination of caste in practice and mental processes. The very recent tragedies that overtook Rohith Vemula in Hyderabad University and Payal Tadvii in a Mumbai medical college reveals how deeply it is woven into the texture of our social life. Even most of the radical ideologies have fallen prey to this error.

Caste struggles, which arose during British rule had a new fillip in the country after independence, esp. from the second half of the 1960s. Both the Congress and the Lohiaite Socialists had a hand in the rapid advance and spread of caste-related struggles, and eventually it percolated into all backward and depressed castes ("dalits"). While these struggles certainly empowered a section of this population, it later got mired in a kind of internecine feud, involving castes under different degrees of social discrimination and stigma attaching to them, in intermittent wrangles ending all hope of unity against a common adversity. Hence extension of democracy in this sphere of social life remains fractured and fragmentary. This has exposed them to various kinds of manipulation by politically dominant elites, most of whom are from advanced castes. It seems that the entire caste question needs to be re-thought to find a way out of this blind alley.

A much-debated issue in any discussion of democracy in India must be the idea of secularism. The idea was made explicit in an amendment of constitution in 1976, but it has been left intact even after the Emergency was lifted and power was transferred to parties other than Congress.

Discussion of secularism itself, which is perhaps not an issue in other democracies, where the principle of toleration meets all its legal consequences, necessarily leads in India to the communal question. Unlike the West, where religion is a matter of personal faith primarily, in India of it remains very much a matter of public demonstration and participation. This characteristic leads at times to social conflict and ruffled feelings. Nowadays this has descended to the level of aggressive and provocative assertions.

Apart from requisite civic and administrative measures to temper such passions, there is an imperative need for education through media and the school system in the necessity and merit of tolerance and respect for people of other faiths. Signs of such activity in the media are rarely to be seen. Textbooks have sometimes helped spread communal poison.

Very often the people swayed by such passions belong to the poorest and most backward sections of the population. The Sachar Committee report and the frequent and startling exposures of the condition of the dalits and Adivasis in India have brought to light the hidden link between backwardness and vulnerability to communal propaganda. Here again, social democracy is the vital precondition for health

and strength of articles of liberalism.

To return to the main thread of the argument, we have to keep in mind that the primal vision of democracy as against the reactionary idea of the state as necessarily engulfing and consuming all individual existence, aimed at complete elimination of coercive state power on the citizen, to the extent it is possible.

To be sure, for several centuries now the concept of the individual had been inextricably linked to the sacred power of private property. For Locke, the full-grown citizen is brought into being by his pursuit of enlargement of his own property. That had led to rampant robbery of common resources, ruthless exploitation of the working people, and gross abuse of law to serve private ends. But with the struggle for wider democracy and the advance of democratic ideas, the state was compelled to work for the interest of all sections of society, eliminating the more obvious kinds of coercion and abuse. If and when there are symptoms of reimposition of such undemocratic coercion, whether by elements of civil society under patronage of the state, or directly by the state itself, it should ring alarum-bells awakening and uniting all who are committed to the democratic vision.

In such a scheme of things the individual has a dignity and sanctity of which he becomes profoundly aware. His self-respect may be deluded by powers that be into belligerence against imaginary enemies, and into a fraudulent vision of a glorious past, cutting him off from a real struggle today to achieve that dignity with rights against dominant social powers.



Unbeknown to himself he is reduced to a beneficiary of state largesse, forgetful of his role as an honourable stake-holder and participant in an ongoing quest for social and human liberation.

At this juncture it has got to be conceded that at certain historical turning points, states founded on the dream of achieving complete human equality and upliftment of all, have in impetuous haste trampled upon fundamental civil liberties, diminishing the individual. Whatever their political loyalties be, all lovers of democracy are duty-bound to set their face against such unforeseen somersaults and ruinous deviations.

The bedrock of a democratic system and its accompanying culture in my view has to be reason, and its elevation as the principle of social unity and political order. Individuals produce reasonings, and through discussion and debate they proceed towards mutual accommodation, though some issues may remain unresolved for the time being, and through it all a greater reason emerges more or less acceptable to all without coercion, that is to say to all who are inspired by and committed to the democratic vision. There will be room for dissent always, in case later a need is felt for course-correction. It is true that people who consider reason an imperfect and untrustworthy instrument and are busy mapping out its shortcomings and failures will never admit that reason throughout history has advanced by overcoming its limitations and learning from its errors.

There is always a chance that certain forces

working within a democratic framework may gain some unforeseen advantage and push it to catapult them into brute power, putting an end to all rational discussion and consensus. There have to be inbuilt safeguards in any democratic system to stop them at their track and there has to be organised vigilance against such a development. Otherwise the institutions that keep democracy alive turn into hollow, empty shells and the citizens find themselves gradually but inexorably deprived of their rights and powers, subject to an enforced consensus of which they are not part.

Among such forces the most disturbing is the immense power of high finance and big money. Their patronage of political parties with enormous funds and subsequent influence on decision-making where such a party comes to power have the power to turn askew policies and decisions adopted in the spirit of democracy. Since such matters ultimately impinge on public awareness they exert pressure on the very veins of democracy—the access to and circulation of information. While there was a time when the printing press had been the sole source of political information for the citizens, as well as an organ of public opinion, in this age of electronic production and circulation of information there is an explosive growth in the speed, range and penetration of such vehicles of information and communication. It is extremely difficult to grasp, far less to check, their damaging power and influence on the health of democracy. The ownership of such vehicles, linked to far-flung financial interests almost spins out of the radar of social awareness and public vigilance.

A related danger of such vehicles is that while it may put people in remotest parts of the world in instantaneous touch with one another, it also puts in their hands the control buttons to pick and choose with whom to establish relations and keep them completely insulated from those they find uncongenial. Real human society is one where we learn to live with difference, with people who do not share our views and ways of life. It is through exchange and conversation with them that we learn the very important virtues of tolerance of difference and acceptance of consensus.

One can hardly shut one's eyes in the real world from the enormous inequalities growing at a fast pace, the insecurity and anxiety that haunts individuals and communities, which pose a threat to the kind of order amoral capital would like to establish. Hence it deploys devious means to legitimise the tyrant state, to generate bubbles of false hopes, and dreams of unsustainable ambitions, as well as tremendous divisions and animosities based on flimsiest of supports. Once such a tyrant state takes hold of all lever of power and neutraliser an independent judiciary, they think nothing of using brute force to suppress all dissent and discussion and moving forward to bury the remains of a democratic system.

At this point the narrow liberal view of human life as the gratification of purely individualist impulses and desertion of the age-old gains of social democracy, in the name of economic development or pursuit of highest individual fulfillment, triumphs and the countervailing power of reason is atrophied. In the

United States, where such an idea of the economy has had a field day for decades, resulting in widespread human misery, Economists like Joseph Stiglitz and Paul Krugman, both Nobel Prize winners, and by no means leftists, have registered deep dismay at such trends. It is no accident that the setback to reason has spawned white supremacist hatred and violence, antipathy to immigrants, steep rise of intolerance and burgeoning of superstitions, against which the supporters of democracy are engaged in a desperate fight.

Under such circumstances the state becomes a sort of self acting machine, heedless of the people it is supposed to work for and accountable to none. In such a hopeless climate, where dissent is crime and resistance high treason, a mirror-image of the tyrant-state takes shape and in no time divides into numerous clones as sundry varieties of terrorism. Fault-lines of organised social and political life keep widening until communication falters and fails. Tyranny and terrorism, being the twin products of the same irrational power-imbalance, enter into an uncanny co-existence, if not symbiosis, deflecting and weakening all attempts at restoration of democracy.

In order that democracies do not meet such a fate, causing untold misery to the people and a woeful regression in civilization, there has to be both within a country and across borders, a conscious alliance and united resistance of all citizenry determined to preserve the precious heritage of democracy. People have to be weaned away from the infantile dream of a reactionary

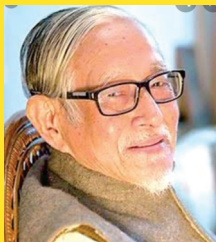
utopia through a relentless struggle for democracy. That requires a profound soul-searching among both the democratic intellectual circles, conscious citizens, and those who spearhead resistance movements of the working masses so that such an alliance can form.

Only if both sides recognize a common stake in democracy, and are prepared to make necessary adjustments and sacrifices to cement this unity, and agree to a rational consensus on the need to preserve, promote and extend democracy, can there be just hope for endurance and progress of one of the most precious creative legacies of human civilization.



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**Prof. Hiren Gohain**, after completing his M.A. in English from University of Delhi in 1962, took Ph.D at Cambridge in 1969 with a thesis on Milton and the 17th century crisis in 1969 from the point of view of intellectual history. Having pursued literary criticism for years, he later on got more involved in socio-political criticism. He has more than 60 collections of essays on various topics. He got Sahitya Akademi award in 1989. He has written numerous articles in *Economic and Political Weekly* on issues in Assam and intellectual history, and has developed a certain perspective on origins and growth of various burning problems of Assam and the Northeast, critical of some prevailing narratives and ideas on the region. He has been a close observer of affairs in Assam and Indian politics.

For the last 40 years, he has been commenting on current affairs in Assam and the country for the lay reader in native tongue with the aim of checking various kinds of chauvinism that aggravate problems, and appealing for a democratic view of things for everyone's benefit.



**Council for Social Development**

**Sangha Rachna**

53, Lodi Estate, New Delhi – 110003

**Phones:** 91-11-24615383, 24611700, 24616061, 24693065, 24692655

**csdnd@bol.net.in, director@csdindia.org; www.csdindia.org**