

Commemorating unsung National Heroes on Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav



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Durgabai Deshmukh

Grand Portrait



Durgabai Deshmukh was a renowned freedom fighter, social reformer, writer, lawyer and a member of constituent assembly and planning commission of India. Popularly called as the ‘Mother of Social Service’, Durgabai strived relentlessly for women emancipation, rehabilitation and empowerment; for family courts and enactment of many social welfare laws. Durgabai served as the first chair person of the ‘Central Social Welfare Board’ and the ‘National Council for Women’s Education’. Durgabai was endowed with several laurels including Padma Vibhushan, Nehru Literacy Award, Paul G Hoffmann Award and UNESCO award.



Durgabai Deshmukh

Childhood



Bennuri Durgabayamma was born on 15 July 1909 to Rama Rao and Krishnavenamma in the town of Rajamahendravaram in East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh. Durgabai imbibed the spirit of selfless social service when her father took her with him through the streets of Kakinada while helping the victims of dreaded plague and cholera. She was married to a wealthy zamindar at the age of eight. At the age of fifteen, she was matured enough to convince and retract amicably from her own child marriage with her father's consent. Heavily influenced by Gandhiji's philosophy, she left school at the age of twelve protesting the enforcement of English medium education. She managed to gather five thousand rupees to host a meeting between a class of oppressed women and Gandhiji in town hall Kakinada in 1921. From then she was fully immersed in freedom struggle as an interpreter and disciple of Gandhiji.

Durgabai Deshmukh

Freedom fighter



Infused with national spirit, Durgabai started 'Balika Hindi Pathasala' to promote Hindi education for girls. She strictly followed and advocated Khadi movement. During a Khadi exhibition held in Kakinada in 1923, as incharge, Durgabai stopped Jawaharlal Nehru from entering and asked to buy a ticket. Nehru praised her for her courage and compliance.

She was imprisoned for three years for organizing women Satyagrahis during Gandhiji's Salt Satyagraha. During this period, she understood the backwardness and ignorance of fellow women prisoners due to lack of education and social status.

Durgabai Deshmukh



Education and empowerment



Upon release from the prison, Durgabai earned Bachelor's and Master's degrees in political science from Andhra University where she was instrumental in setting up the first women's hostel. She obtained Law degree from Madras University. She started Andhra Mahila Sabha to facilitate educational and vocational training which is still operational and considered as a pioneering institute for women welfare in south India. By 1942, she was a renowned criminal lawyer

Durgabai Deshmukh

Member of constituent assembly



Durgabai was appointed to the constituent assembly in 1946 and debated on many important issues such as the property rights for women under the Hindu code bill and the importance of independence of judiciary. She moved about 750 amendments on her own as well as in collaboration with other assembly members.

Durgabai Deshmukh

Member of planning commission



She was appointed member of planning commission of India in 1950, the only woman on its panel of chairmen. She mustered support for a national policy on social welfare and also emphasized the need for separate family courts

Durgabai Deshmukh



Marriage



In 1953, Durgabai married Chintaman Deshmukh who had just finished service as the first Indian Governor of Reserve Bank. When they married he was serving as the finance minister. Jawaharlal Nehru was a witness at their simple registration marriage. The next day was business as usual for them-Durgabai Deshmukh set off to do famine relief work in Pune and Chintaman Deshmukh to work on national budget.

Durgabai Deshmukh



Pioneer



Durgabai served as the first chair person of the National Council for Women's Education in 1958. Under her leadership, the council made invaluable recommendations such as provision of free primary education to girls, reservation of seats for women in various services and programmes for adult education. In 1963, Durgabai was appointed member of the Indian delegation to the world food congress in Washington and as also served as an invited UNESCO expert to prepare a draft Asian model for educational purposes.

Durgabai Deshmukh



Durgabai Deshmukh passed away on 9 May 1981 in Narasannapeta, Andhra Pradesh, leaving behind her legacy of institutions that continue to provide education and health services to thousands. Durgabai Deshmukh's determination, courage and selfless service to the society will continue to inspire generations to come.



Sources: [Durgabai Deshmukh: A Warrior For Women, Justice, Country : Live History India](#)
'Chintaman and I', Autobiography of Durgabai Deshmukh.