



THE ROLE OF DURGABAI DESHMUKH AS A WOMEN'S EMANCIPATOR AND THE FOUNDER OF THE ANDHRA MAHILA SABHA IN MADRAS (AMS)

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Durgabai Deshmukh was a trailblazing social reformer, independence warrior, and ardent supporter of women's empowerment in India. She made significant contributions to women's advancement in the areas of social change, legal rights, and education. She was instrumental in creating laws that guaranteed gender equality in independent India while serving in the Constituent Assembly. This paper aims to illuminate the operations of the Andhra Mahila Sabha in Madras (AMS) and analyse Durgabai Deshmukh's role in women's empowerment. Durgabai played a key role in the founding of the Andhra Mahila Sabha and other organisations for women's education and career training. Along with opposing societal ills like child marriage and dowries, Durgabai also promoted widow remarriage. Her dedication to women's welfare, health, and economic independence was further strengthened by her work with the Central Social Welfare Board and the Planning Commission. Durgabai became a real emancipator of women via her unwavering efforts, and her influence on India's social fabric endured.

Keywords: *Emancipator, Social Reformer, Freedom Fighter, Women's Empowerment, Legal Rights, Constituent Assembly, Andhra Mahila Sabha, Child Marriage, Dowry*

"Women must have knowledge, because only knowledge can remove their oppression and make them strong."
– Savitribai Phule

Introduction

Since ancient times, women have played a vital role in creating a more balanced society (Roy, 2023). Women have engaged themselves in every domain of the society to create a balance, in the domestic as well as the public realm (Saha, 2023; Sen, 2023). The emancipation of women in India was greatly aided by the outstanding leadership, social reformer, and educator Durgabai Deshmukh. She had a strong commitment to social justice and gender equality as a Constituent Assembly member and liberation fighter. She thought that legal rights, economic independence, and education could all contribute to women's empowerment. Durgabai founded a number of organisations to support women's education and career training, such as the Andhra Mahila Sabha or AMS (Kishorenath, 2019). In order to strengthen and promote the women's community, this AMS created a ladies' hostel, nursing homes for women, sister organisation, and Vnitha Bala Vihar school (Kishorenath, 2019). She also actively promoted widow remarriage and campaigned to end discriminatory customs including child marriage and dowries. Her participation in the Planning Commission and the Central Social Welfare Board, where she carried out welfare programs for women's employment, social security, and health, allowed her to contribute to policymaking. Durgabai Deshmukh became a pivotal player in changing the lives of Indian women and opening the door for their active engagement in society via her visionary leadership and unwavering efforts just like Maria Montessori, Mary Wollstonecraft and Nel Noddings (Adhikari & Saha, 2021c; 2021d; 2022). Generations striving for social advancement and gender equality are still motivated by her legacy.

Life and Education of Durgabai Deshmukh

Durgabai Deshmukh was born on July 15, 1909, in Rajahmundry, Andhra Pradesh, British India, into a Vaidiki Brahmin family. In 1934 Durgabai successfully completed her private matriculation test at Banaras Hindu University. She eventually earned a B.A. with honours in Political Science after passing the intermediate test. She became a lawyer after pursuing more study into her late 20s. She wed C.D. Deshmukh, the Union Finance Minister, in 1953. From a young age, Durgabai was exposed to the harsh realities of gender inequality. She persisted in her studies in spite of social conventions that discouraged women from pursuing higher education. She actively participated in Indian liberation movement and was impacted by the beliefs of Mahatma Gandhi. She showed her dedication to social justice as a young child by joining the non-cooperation movement. *The Stone That Speaketh* is a novel written by Durgabai Deshmukh. *Chintaman and I*, her autobiography, was released in 1981, one year prior to her passing.

Objectives of The Study

- i. To study the life and philosophy of Durgabai Deshmukh.
- ii. To discuss the role of Durgabai Deshmukh in women empowerment and emancipation.
- iii. To light up the activity of Andhra Mahila Sabha at Madras (AMS).

Review of Literature

Rani (2012) has examined Durgabai Deshmukh's contributions to the Andhra liberation movement. This study aims to examine Durgabai Deshmukh's role in the fight for liberation. Her early life and effects were also investigated.

Kishorenath (2019) conducted various activities and carried out research on the founding and operations of the Andhra Mahila Sabha in Madras (AMS). For the purpose of empowering and developing the women's community, this AMS founded several institutions, including the Vnitha Bala Vihar School, sister organisations, built of ladies' hostel, nursing homes for women for the empowerment and development of the women community.

Adhikari and Saha (2021) discussed about women's involvement in politics and education, with a focus on the twenty-first century. The greatest way to break societal limits for women is via education. Women are like a bird's wing, without which society cannot function as it should. Women's empowerment may be achieved via education, which also increase women's political engagement.

Adhikari and Saha (2021a) have studied on some lesser-known but noteworthy female educators and reformers including Durgabai Deshmukh, Anutai Wagh, Tarabai Modak, Pandita Ramabai, and others. They were all trailblazers for women's empowerment who established a new standard for social service. By providing care and support to the vast number of rural and tribal women who were part of underdeveloped communities, they have attempted to improve society.

Roy et al. (2023) examined the main ideas of a few notable individuals on social and educational advancement, which can help realise the goal of national development. In the current study, they also emphasised the role of women's empowerment in a number of areas.

Roy (2023) investigated in the context of education on women and society. The goal of the current study was to investigate how women might help change society by eliminating social injustices and illnesses. In contrast to the western world, the author also remembered the names of a few lesser-known female educators who contributed to the broader process of women's empowerment in Indian culture.

Kumari (2024) examined the pioneers of change in the fields of women's rights, education, and reformers in British colonial India. This study discussed how women reformers like Annie Besant, Durgabai Deshmukh, Pandita Ramabai, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, and Savitribai Phule changed attitudes towards women's education in India. The study emphasised how crucial these trailblazing women were in guiding India toward a more just and progressive society, laying the groundwork for more extensive conversions on women's concerns that still have relevance today.

Research Methodology: This research is qualitative in nature. The nature of this study is mostly descriptive. It was carried out using secondary sources of information, such as books, papers, research journals, and other websites.

Philosophy of Durgabai Deshmukh

As a satyagrahi, Durgabai Deshmukh was essential in organising women's satyagrahis within the movement and never wore jewellery or makeup. She believed in,

Justice for Society: No matter a person's gender, caste, or class, Durgabai Deshmukh believed in social justice and equality for everyone. Her thought was based on the notion that social change and group advancement were the only ways to truly achieve freedom.

Women Empowerment: A well-educated woman many maintain equilibrium in her family, community, and life (Abowitz, 2017; Adhikari & Saha, 2021). Deshmukh was certain that women need to have the ability to fully participate in society. In the addition to helping women, this empowerment would advance the general growth of the country.

Education is The Tool to Change Society: According to Durgabai, education is the most effective way to empower women and bring about societal change. She promoted education and literacy as everyone's fundamental rights.

Role of Durgabai Deshmukh in Women Empowerment and Emancipation

One of the most important aspects of social advancement in raising the proportion of women who are included and participate in all facets of society (Roy, 2023a). Working for women's advancement, Durgabai Deshmukh championed women's empowerment (Bhattacharjee, 2019). The area of women's education was one of Durgabai Deshmukh's most important contributions. She founded the Andhra Mahila Sabha in 1937 because she saw how important education was to women's empowerment. This organisation made history by giving women access to education and career training that enabled them to become economically independent. In 1948, she founded Balika Hindi Pathshala in Rajamundry and Andhra Education Society (Bhattacharjee, 2019). Durgabai passionately thought that education was the key to overcoming the cycle of oppression suffered by women. She put in endless effort to encourage women, especially those from disadvantaged circumstances, to become literate. Her advocacy extended beyond formal education to include skill development programs that enabled women to secure employment. Her support of skill-development initiatives that helped women land jobs went beyond formal education.

Women's Rights and Social Reforms: Durgabai Deshmukh was a strong opponent of societal ills such dowries, child marriages, and discrimination based on gender. She strongly promoted equal rights for women in marriage and inheritance, as well as widow remarriage. She advocated for measures that would provide women more autonomy and legal rights by holding leadership positions in a number of organisations. She devoted her life to promoting widow remarriage and fighting against discriminatory customs such as child marriage and dowries.

Additionally, she was instrumental in promoting legislation that protected women's rights and guaranteed their participation in politics and government. As an attorney, she sought to help women who were being exploited and subjected to domestic abuse by offering them legal assistance.

Role in social Welfare and Policy Making: Durgabai Deshmukh, the creator of the Central Social Welfare Board and a member of the Planning Commission of India, carried out a number of initiatives to better the lot of women. She started initiatives pertaining to child welfare, work, nutrition, and women's health. Several programs were started under her direction to help working women, offer maternity benefits, and upgrade childcare facilities. National Committee on Women's Education Durgabai Deshmukh served as the head of the National Committee for women's Education, which was established by the Indian Government on May 19, 1958. Another name for the committee was the Durgabai Deshmukh Committee (Bhattacharjee, 2021). As a result of her efforts at the Central Social Welfare Board, training facilities, women's hostel, and rehabilitation programs for impoverished women were established. These programs gave women new chances to become independent and take an active role in society.

Impact and Legacy: The efforts Durgabai Deshmukh made to the emancipation of women have a long-lasting effect on Indian society. Her work in social welfare, education, and legal reform cleared the path for later generations of women to follow their dreams without worrying about prejudice. The organisations she established are now vital resources for women who want to pursue higher education and financial autonomy. Her memory continues to serve as motivation for people who support social justice and gender equality. Numerous women live were changed by Durgabai Deshmukh's vision and commitment, which gave them the means and chances to live empowered lives.

Andhra Mahila Sabha's Activities in Madras

Durgabai Deshmukh established the Andhra Mahila Sabha in 1937 with the goal of empowering women in Andhra Pradesh. The organisation has been instrumental in advancing social welfare, education, and women's rights. The following are some important Andhra Mahila Sabha related activities:

Founded school and Hostel: In order to give girls and women access to high-quality education while encouraging literacy and educational possibilities, the Sabha founded schools and other educational establishments. There was a library and a reading room. There, young ladies may take free craft instruction. An elementary school approved by the Madras Government's education department was operated in the park and another significant project that was initiated between 1940 and 1942 was women's hostel; Those who stayed in the hostels while pursuing their education through AMS went on to volunteer for Sarvodaya and charity activities (Kishorenath, 2019).

Health Care for women: The organisation has addresses maternity and child health, as well as women's health concerns, through health education and healthcare services. The Sabha started distributing milk to children and expecting women in the nearby slums on its own property (Kishorenath, 2019).

Financial Empowerment: Through skill development programs, self-help groups, and vocational training, Sabha has attempted to economically empower women so they can achieve financial independence. Hundreds of women who had fallen on bad days and needed financial support were given work by Durgabai (Kishorenath, 2019).

Welfare for Women and Social: The Andhra Mahila Sabha has fought to improve the standing of women in society and has supported orphanages, underprivileged communities, among other social welfare projects. Women's nursing homes to support the community's growth and empowerment (Kishorenath, 2019).

Campaigning: The Sabha has been a strong supporter of social justice and women's rights, running programs to increase public awareness of problems impacting women and advocating for legislative improvements.

Cultural events: In order to increase women's visibility and cultivate a sense of community, the organisation supports cultural events and initiatives that honour their contributions to society.

Counselling and Legal Aid: The Sabha offered counselling and legal support to women who are dealing with discrimination, domestic abuse, and other legal issues.

Studies and Publications: To increase public awareness and educate the public on women's rights and empowerment, the Andhra Mahila Sabha has published materials and carried out research on women's issue. With their invaluable contributions, women authors such as Narani Krishna Kumari, Sthanapathi Rukmanamma, and Kanuparthi Varalakshamma enhanced the pages of Andhra Mahila. Women in the South ran the publication, which focused on women's issues (Kishorenath, 2019).

Conclusion

The significance of Durgabai Deshmukh as an emancipator of women is unmatched. She devoted her life to dismantling social constraints and giving women the resources they need to realize their greatest potential. Her contributions to social change, education, and government established the groundwork for a society with more equity. On the advice of the Durgabai Deshmukh committee, several new schools were established, and girls in both rural and urban regions received free education up to class viii in practically every state (Bhattacharjee, 2021). The Andhra Mahila Sabha is still powerful force in promoting women's rights and social change because of Durgabai Deshmukh's vision and leadership, which have had a long-lasting effect on women's empowerment in the area. The organisation's operations were fairly extensive and diversified and diversified, encompassing the domains of education, medicine, nursing, social services, and adult literacy in women. Smt. Durgabai once noted that A.M.S. offers all the facilities required for women's growth from infancy to maturity (Kishorenath, 2019). Her contributions continue to motivate initiatives in India for social advancement and women's empowerment.

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