

Durgabai Deshmukh Memorial Lecture 2026

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“A New Consciousness for a Fractured Time Rethinking India’s Development Path”

By

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Venue: C.D Deshmukh Auditorium, IIC (Main), New Delhi

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It is one of the abiding tragedies of India’s development experience that nearly 80 years after Independence, we still struggle to provide our people the most important needs of life: water, nutrition, health, education and employment. Building on the specific example of water, I will suggest that these “wicked” problems require an approach that makes a clean break from the paradigms of the 20th century, mired as they were in a crude “magic bullet” consciousness. Instead, we need to embrace and address the uncertainty we are faced with and have the humility to recognize how little we can know and do alone and how much more we can accomplish through a multi-stakeholder, trans-disciplinary approach, based on deep listening and building together.

The champions of technology, the free market and the totalitarian state, each peddled their own fundamentalisms throughout the 20th century. Instead of the Shangri-La they promised, each one of them, in their own ways, have pushed the planet perilously close to annihilation. Our challenge is not to allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the undeniable darknesses of our time but to seize the light that still shines within. Can we walk the Earth with a respect for the multiplicity of knowledges, cultures and ecologies, listening deeply to both communities and Nature, with an acknowledgement of how much there is to be gained from the richness of this diversity? Can we show the courage to chart a new course of restraint, freedom, creativity and joy, learning from traditions that embody a wisdom that we have, in our arrogance, consigned to the dustbins of history? Humanity, in stewardship of the earth, would do well to heed this counsel – before it is too late!