

DURGABAI DESHMUKH MEMORIAL LECTURE 2026



**A New Consciouness for a Fractured Time
Charting a Path of Genuine Transformation**

By

Mihir Shah

July 15, 2026

Council for Social Development (CSD)

Council for Social Development (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 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 capacity building 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.



Council for Social Development

Sangha Rachna

53, Lodi Estate, New Delhi – 110003

Phones: +91-11-2461 5383, 2461 1700, 2461 6061

Email: csdnd@csdindia.org, director@csdindia.org www.csdindia.org

**DURGABAI DESHMUKH MEMORIAL
LECTURE 2026**

**A New Consciousness for a Fractured Time
Charting a Path of Genuine Transformation**

Mihir Shah

A New Consciousness for a Fractured Time Charting a Path of Genuine Transformation

Mihir Shah

Abstract

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!

A New Consciousness for a Fractured Time Charting a Path of Genuine Transformation

It is indeed a great privilege for me to be delivering a lecture to honour the memory of Durgabai Deshmukh. Durgabai was among the pantheon of legendary freedom fighters and social workers whose stories I grew up listening to, from my mother Vidyaben Shah, throughout my childhood. It is remarkable how closely the careers of Vidyaben and Durgabai resemble each other, both having been freedom fighters and social activists, and both having served as Chairpersons of the Central Social Welfare Board!

I also feel affinity for Durgabai because like me, she served on the Planning Commission of India. Of course, she was a member of the very first Planning Commission and I was a member of the very last one! Indeed, when I looked up the record more carefully I realised that it has made a mistake in describing me as the youngest ever Member of the Planning Commission. This honour actually belongs to Durgabai who became a Member of the very first Planning Commission at the very young age of 41! I am delighted to be second in a list headed by her!!

What I am here to say to you today would have resonated very deeply with Durgabai. Because she was the quintessential champion of the unheralded causes and the invisible people. My own life has been dedicated to both. What I have learnt over the past forty years of my professional life owes most of all to the Adivasis of central India, the invisible people with whom I lived and worked for more than 3 decades, building brick-by-brick the outlines of a new paradigm of development, for India and for our time.

Neglect of Basic Needs since Independence

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. Often, people like us, place the blame for this, on the policies adopted after the era of economic "reforms" started in the 1990s.

But it needs reminding that one of the huge weaknesses of the Nehru-Indira era was the terrible neglect of nutrition, health, education and employment and, something that I will come to in a bit, a set of misplaced priorities, as far as water is concerned. So whether it was a time when the state was in charge of the “commanding heights of the economy” (Lenin’s phrase, much beloved of Nehru) or when the economy was more and more handed over to the corporates after the 1990s, the most important needs of the Indian people continue to suffer monumental neglect. India still spends almost the lowest proportion of GDP on health among all countries in the world, so that out-of-pocket expenditure on health remains the single most important cause of families sinking into poverty. The abysmal quality of primary education is attested to year after year by the ASER reports. India continues to have among the largest proportion of anaemic pregnant women in the world and we have globally the highest number of malnourished children. Even as India claims a place among the fastest growing and largest economies in the world, the single most important issue angering our youth remains the unacceptably high rates of unemployment. The social discrimination and historical injustice suffered by our women, Dalits and Adivasis continues to be a record no Indian can be proud of. And all of this has remained the case for the past 8 decades, quite irrespective of the dispensation in power!

Follies of the GDP Obsession

The common element of Indian economic policy ever since Independence is the obsession with attaining higher and higher rates of growth of GDP. As if by magic, it was assumed, the benefits of this growth would become available to the large mass of our people, even if only in a trickle! But as you all know, the GDP is blind to the good: whether growth is inclusive, how many jobs it generates, whether these jobs are secure and meaningful and whether the incomes generated are well-distributed. The GDP is also blind to the bad: resource depletion, eco-system damage, long-term environmental risk, as also gender, caste, social and regional discrimination and injustice. GDP cannot directly measure nutrition, health and learning outcomes, social inclusion or institutional trust. Nor is it able to capture the enormous contribution of unpaid care work or the precarity of informal work.

Wicked Problems

My purpose in briefly summarising the failures of the dominant development paradigm of our time is to try and pinpoint precisely where this failure originates from. The first reason lies in not appreciating the very nature of these problems, which does not make them amenable to simple magic bullet solutions like government control or privatisation. These are what the science of public policy likes to call “wicked problems” (Rittel and Webber, 1973).

Wicked problems have a very specific character: they necessarily require a trans-disciplinary approach and multi-stakeholder engagement. They cannot be solved without the active engagement of the primary stakeholders, who are the communities, most disadvantaged and marginalised in the process of development. Wicked problems remind us that democracy and development need to necessarily go hand-in-hand. Without strengthening democracy at the grass-roots, development will always remain excluding and even destructive. We know this clearly from the fact that education, nutrition and health outcomes are superior in regions of India, such as the South, where community engagement, especially that of women, is much stronger. We need to actively adopt the “principle of subsidiarity”, which posits that solutions must be found closest to where the problems exist. Of course, we must not romanticise this principle to mean that in all situations local communities are competent and best able to solve their problems on their own. For one, there are internal divisions among most communities in India, along the axes of class, caste, gender and ethnicity. What is more, in situations involving the most marginalised people, the state has a vital and unavoidable role to play, however much Gandhi would have had us believe otherwise! Thus, the state must make massive investments to ensure that everyone receives the best health care and education, which the Indian state has failed to ensure, ever since Independence. As Vidyaben Shah wrote to Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, as he embarked on the economic reforms of the 1990s, “What the private sector will not do, what the market cannot do, the state must”. At the same time, mere expenditures, without engagement of local communities, has led to what I described in the 12th Five Year Plan as the “U without Q” or

“Universalisation without Quality” syndrome in India’s more recent development history, where there has been a much-needed focus on universal human rights but not the same emphasis on quality outcomes.

Water: India’s Gravest Crisis

The one wicked problem I would like to dwell on a little deeper is water, which I regard as India’s gravest but least attended to crisis, and which is crying out for a comprehensive paradigm shift (Shah, 2013). Ever since Independence, India has relied on the construction of large dams and relentless extraction of groundwater to meet our water needs. Sadly, this has been done with a single-minded intent of establishing a mastery over Nature. This command-and-control approach, which my friend Margreet Zwartaveen (2011) has aptly described as “masculinities in water”, was never a good idea but is totally unsuited for an era of climate change.

This also reveals yet another mistake in dealing with wicked problems: seeking narrow engineering solutions to water, completely forgetting that wicked problems necessarily demand a trans-disciplinary approach. If you look at any water resource department in India, whether at the Centre or in the States, you will only find civil engineers and a few hydrogeologists. But how will we ever save our rivers if we do not learn from the science of River Ecology? How will we ever solve India’s water problem if we do not recognise that agriculture takes up nearly 90% of our water and without an agronomic understanding of the need for a diversification of our cropping patterns in line with India’s diverse agro-ecology, we will never be able to reduce the humongous demands we are placing on our limited water resources? How will we ever save our rivers, as also the lives of our water reservoirs, if we do not protect their catchment areas and compensate the Adivasis and hill dwellers who protect them? For this we need to be informed by the insights of Ecological Economics. And finally, most importantly, we can never manage our surface and groundwater effectively without adopting a participatory management approach, led by the primary stakeholders of water, our farmers. All of this shows that we have made a terrible mistake in the way we have sought to solve our water problem. What we have done in this endless drive of construction and

extraction is to actually aggravate our water crisis, even in areas of India which are fairly abundant in water.

Water also helps understand another key abiding failure of Indian planning (which has outlasted the abolition of the Planning Commission): thinking and acting in silos. The surface and groundwater departments all over India, at the Centre and in the States, operate in blissful ignorance of one another. As I said in the 12th Five Year Plan chapter on Water, “the left hand of drinking water does not know what the right hand of irrigation is doing”. This is the main reason why, despite trying for so many decades, we are still far from providing basic drinking water security to the Indian people. What typically happens is that the aquifer that was providing drinking water to the village is also tapped into by rich farmers growing water-intensive crops. Since the requirements of irrigation are a huge multiple of the needs of drinking water, the handpump soon runs dry and is no longer able to provide water.

This “hydro-schizophrenia” (Jarvis *et al*, 2005) is also the main reason why most peninsular rivers of India are increasingly beginning to dry up. This is because the water flows in these rivers after the monsoon are sustained by the base-flows of groundwater but as we drill deeper and deeper into the bowels of the earth, these base-flows are exhausted and “gaining” rivers end up becoming “losing” rivers, till the point where both aquifers and rivers empty out!

The most important lesson we learn from our experience with water is that we must respect diversity, which we have run roughshod over in the “one-size-fits-all” approach of centralised planning, something that, once again, continues even after the abolition of the Planning Commission. All the diversity of India is our enormous strength, which we must build on, whether it is socio-cultural, agro-ecological or bio-hydrogeological. We have a huge diversity of rock and soil types and agro-climatic zones but in our water and agricultural planning, these find no place. After the Green Revolution, we have encouraged monocultures of highly water-intensive wheat and rice, irrespective of whether they are suited to a particular region, which has hurt farm productivity and aggravated our water crisis. The main lesson we must draw here is that no economy can thrive if it is

not finely tuned to the larger eco-system of which it is a small part. The economy must not only recognise and respect the “planetary boundaries” (Rockstrom *et al*, 2009) imposed by this eco-system but also nurture and nourish it, as far as possible.

Building towards a New Development Paradigm

In trying to better understand how to forge a new path for development and transformation in India, I would draw your attention to some incredibly powerful but relatively neglected work that the Singapore-born political scientist Yuen Yuen Ang has been doing at Johns Hopkins University, specifically focused on understanding the Chinese development experience. As Ang says, we must recognise certain defining elements of any process of transformation: “interdependence, uncertainty, adaptation, learning, and influence” (Ang, 2025). This is very close to the themes I have been focused on for the past 2 decades, ever since I worked at the Planning Commission. I first explored these ideas in my paper *The Power of Uncertainty* (Shah, 2010).

Based on my reflections and the actual experience of implementing these ideas during the formulation of the 12th Five Year Plan (2012-13), as also while chairing the Committee to draft the National Water Policy (2019-20), let me summarise for you the key elements of the approach we need to adopt that would help us avoid the mistakes of the past and genuinely move towards transformative change in India. In so doing, we build a novel relationship both with society and with Nature.

A New Social Compact

1. *Rejection of any kind of Fundamentalism:* We must reject the notion of a single truth or THE correct path. What saves science from degenerating into a dogma is the acknowledgment of the limits of knowing. This liberates us from the tyranny of certainty, whose claim is a part of the arrogance of power and the aspiration for which leads to a suppression of dissent, enquiry and the sense of wonder and mystery that has to be the beginning of all science and all action. This calls for a non-assertion of the definitive

- correctness of one's own viewpoint – an acknowledgment that truth resides in a multi-point matrix, not in any one location. That it flows from multiple directions and is embodied in relationships.
2. *Nimble-footedness in Policy-making and Implementation:* Therefore, what is required is an openness to mid-course correction as new knowledge is acquired and fresh experience is gained over time. This means an abandonment of the heavy-handed inflexibility and dogmatism, which characterises so many of our development interventions.
 3. *The Criticality of Dialogue:* An economist whose work has failed to receive the kind of attention it deserves is GLS Shackle. In his incredibly insightful 1972 work *Epistemics and Economics*, Shackle argues that since “the ultimate permissive condition of knowledge is the repetition of recognisable configurations” (Shackle, 1972, p.6), this limits the possibilities of knowing the courses of action that will be chosen in future. Shackle's work potentially takes Economics into novel territory such as the role of imagination to assess the plausibility of alternative outcomes while taking economic decisions. But the very freedom that is the basis for imagination makes perfect knowledge an impossibility. Shackle, therefore, posits a fundamental hiatus between freedom and knowledge, as also between time and reason. Shackle writes:

“Time is a denial of the omnipotence of reason. Time divides the entirety of things into that part about which we can reason and that part about which we cannot. Yet the part about which we cannot reason has a bearing on the meaning of the part that is amenable to reason. The analyst is obliged to practice, in effect, a denial of the nature of time. For he can reason only about that which is in effect complete; and in a world where there is time, nothing is ever complete.” (Shackle, 1972, p27).

This acknowledgement of our own finitude opens up the possibility that we also look elsewhere, to other sources for support in our quest for knowledge. This necessitates deep listening and the building of common ground across differences, respecting a diversity of approaches and standpoints. It calls for an attempt to

learn from the context where change is being attempted – an open and rich dialogue, a true engagement, which is both transparent and participatory, and thereby also more accountable and open to mid-course correction. Dialogue is a corrective to the stridency of both the bottom-up activist and the top-down planner. Neither by itself is appropriate or adequate. What matters, what enlightens, is deep dialogue, an engagement from which something quite unanticipatable, something novel, emerges and guides action.

4. *Fusion of Horizons*: I want to refer all of you to the extraordinary German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer and to his magisterial work *Truth and Method* (which is often described as one of two or three key philosophical texts of the 20th century). Gadamer's goal in *Truth and Method* was, in his own words, to understand "what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing" (*op.cit.*, p.26). For Gadamer (1989: 271-273), understanding is always a "fusion of horizons":

"What do we mean by 'placing ourselves' in a situation? Certainly not just disregarding ourselves. This is necessary, of course, in that we must imagine the other situation. But into this other situation we must also bring ourselves. This always involves the attainment of a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand, not in order to look away from it, but to see it better within a larger whole and in truer proportion. Understanding is always a fusion of horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves."

Our knowledge thereby loses the dogmatism of its own voice by acknowledging the need to listen to and understand the knowledge produced by the other, whose situation we may be trying to transform. These are situations and contexts with a dynamic of their own. The impact of what we do is mediated through the ongoing dynamic of the context where our initiative rolls out. We need to study and understand this dynamic, with humility, openness and compassion.

5. *Inside-Outside Positionality*: I agree with the Franciscan friar Richard Rohr, who spent many years bringing about change within

the Church, that transformational change comes only from those who “live on the edge of the inside”, which is when “you have learned the rules well enough to know how to break the rules properly, which is not really to break them at all, but to find their true purpose.” Thus, we are not content to be mere critics from the outside but strive to be those who can bring about real change through constructive, critical engagement with those in power. As Rohr further says:

“Not an outsider throwing rocks, nor a comfortable insider who defends the status quo, but one who lives precariously with two perspectives held tightly together—the faithful insider and the critical outsider at the same time. Not ensconced safely inside, but not so far outside as to lose compassion or understanding.” (Rohr, 2023)

A New Respect for and Understanding of Nature

1. *Weaving our Interventions into the Contours of Nature*: Once we recognise the contours defined by the balances in Nature, our entire approach shifts from an attempt to control Nature towards a creative weaving of our interventions into the flows and dynamics of natural processes. This requires a new imagination, to use Shackle’s term, in visualizing the future. The best positive examples of this are watershed management and the move towards natural farming.

Attempts are being made all over the world to foster an eco-system approach to farming, with higher sustainability and resilience, lower costs of production, as also economy in water use. Broadly, these alternatives to chemical farming come under the rubric of agro-ecology (Shah, 2022). Essentially, this is an attempt to redefine our relationship with Nature, where we seek to weave our interventions into the contours of Nature, rather than seeking mastery over it. The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded everyone, like never before, of how circumscribed the economy necessarily is by the nature of the larger eco-system governing it. The pandemic

is clearly a result of non-recognition of the value of the smallest to the largest creation. It is not merely a matter of realising the constraints within which we operate but of re-envisioning the response: moving from a paradigm of linear mechanics to thinking in terms of complex dynamics. The pandemic forces everyone to acknowledge that this is now imperative, not just for greater prosperity but for the very survival of human life on earth.

The dominance of chemical farming has had very serious but not fully understood consequences. According to Kate Brown (2020), MIT Professor of Science, Technology and Society:

“Within the uniform predictability of modern agriculture, the unpredictable emerges. Two-thirds of cancers have their origins in environmental toxins, accounting for millions of annual fatalities . . . we inhabit not the Earth but the atmosphere, a sea of life; as swimmers in this sea, we cannot be biologically isolated . . . Biologists have begun questioning the idea that each tree is an “individual”—it might be more accurately understood as a node in a network of underworld exchanges between fungi, roots, bacteria, lichen, insects, and other plants. The network is so intricate that it’s difficult to say where one organism ends and the other begins”.

More specifically, it is clear that

“There is a large list of deadly pathogens that emerged due to the ways in which we practice agriculture, among which are: H5N1-Asian Avian Influenza, H5N2, multiple Swine Flu variants (H1N1, H1N2), Ebola, Campylobacter, Nipah virus, Q fever, hepatitis E, Salmonella enteritidis, foot-and-mouth disease, and a variety of influenzas. (Altieri and Nicholls 2020: 23)

This necessitates a paradigm shift in our structures of thought and action, to grasp complex adaptive systems (where the complexity of the behaviour of the whole system cannot be completely grasped by an understanding of its individual parts), of which farming is a very important example.

2. *Respecting Interdependence in Nature*: There is nothing perhaps that illustrates the perils of ignoring inter-connectedness in Nature than the water cycle. Sadly, water policies and programs all over the world, throughout the 20th century, were formulated ignoring the profound inter-connectedness of different elements of the water cycle. A potentially catastrophic illustration is the plan to link India's Himalayan rivers with Peninsular rivers for inter-basin transfer of water, estimated to cost Rs. 11 lakh crore. Not only does this plan have unimaginable ecological and energy costs, the scheme could have a disastrous impact on the very integrity of the monsoon cycle. The presence of a low salinity layer of water with low density is a reason for maintenance of high sea-surface temperatures in the Bay of Bengal, which contributes to low-pressure areas and the intensification of monsoon activity. Rainfall over much of the sub-continent is controlled by this layer of low salinity water, which arises because the fresh water of India's rivers flows into the sea. A disruption in these flows, and as a result, in this low salinity layer, could have serious long-term consequences for climate and rainfall in the subcontinent, endangering the livelihoods of a vast population (Shah, 2013). Once again not recognising how each element in the monsoon cycle is deeply inter-connected with the other, could be a disastrous mistake.
3. *Location-specific interventions reflecting every element of diversity - social, cultural and physical*: Since we intervene in very diverse contexts, we need to give up the bureaucratic one-size-fits-all, monocultural approach. Across India we are faced with multifarious variations -- in rainfall received, in soil and rock type, in slope and contour, in animal forms, in kinds of vegetation, crop or forest -- and each of these and each combination of these, has different implications for the possibilities of striking, harvesting and storing water as also the possible forms of livelihood. Many of these variations occur even within a small micro-watershed. And this natural diversity has a complex interplay with the socio-cultural-economic tapestry of these regions. That includes values regarding life-goals, priorities, understanding of and relationship with natural forces and resources, etc. Which have evolved over centuries, if not

millennia. This canvas of *differentia specifica* poses a unique challenge to the development planner, the scientist, the social worker. Those who seek to intervene in any context, but especially in one with such diversity and potential fragility, cannot do so on the basis of a notion of mastery over nature and society. With mastery and control, comes the resort to simple tech-fixes -- monocultural, unilinear, indiscriminate. Irrespective of the specific challenges of each situation, an unthinking, insensitive bureaucracy seeks to impose its own pet solution -- tubewells, eucalyptus, soyabean, Holstein Friesian. Appropriateness does not matter. Sustainability is of no concern. Dialogue is not attempted. History is given a go by. With disastrous consequences.

In our development programs, unfortunately, we have sought to impose simplistic answers, top-down, without making the effort to understand the context, in all its diversity and complexity. We have been narrowly pre-occupied with single variables like aggregate income, neglecting completely the entire range of issues involved in eco-system resilience and stability. Disciplines, narrowly defined through specialisation, have not spoken to each other. Nor have they spoken to the people in whose name solutions are sought to be developed. They have not been mindful of the balance that must be retained if our interventions are to be sustainable. Nature and society are not to be mastered or subdued. They are, rather, to be deeply understood so that we can weave our interventions in a creative manner into their delicate fabric. Consistently learning each step of the way -- light, nimble and innovative in our tread.

My Attempts at Innovations in Policy-making Processes

Happily, I got the opportunity, both when I was Member, Planning Commission and when I chaired the Committee to draft the National Water Policy, to put these ideas into action. By the early 21st century, it had become evident to all scholars and practitioners on water that a big change was needed in water governance and management in India. It was clear that business-as-usual would not do for either surface or ground water. The preoccupation with supply-side solutions needed to give way to demand-side management and governance. The principle of subsidiarity

was crying out for adoption. But there were major vested interests blocking the way forward. There was a whole political economy of corruption around water and those who had enjoyed the fruits of this system were not inclined to change or allow change to happen.

New ideas needed to be desperately put into place for which the best scholars and practitioners had to come together. This required a new architecture of plan formulation. I insisted that the Working Groups (WGs) for the 12th Plan in the water sector, for the first time in the history of the Planning Commission, be all chaired by renowned experts from outside government. These included giants like Himanshu Kulkarni, Sunita Narain, A Vaidyanathan, Tushaar Shah, Joe Mediath and Nirmal Sengupta. Secretaries of concerned departments were designated co-chairs. Members of the WGs were the best scholars and practitioners on water and represented the full diversity of concerned stakeholders. This was not mere tokenistic consultation. The government was not just speaking to stakeholders; the members of the Working Groups were actually drafting the 12th Five Year Plan. They were writing programs and policies. This had never happened before. The process of hammering out agreement on change was deeply inclusive and the most important part was that it had buy-in from key implementers, especially the State governments. They were a central part of fashioning this change and the most innovative ideas sketched out in the 12th Plan were all based on examples of best practice from the States. There was initially great resistance to this move both within and outside government. Within government, Secretaries of the concerned Ministries protested to the Prime Minister saying it had never happened before that they were not chairing the Working Groups. But the Prime Minister strongly stood by me. Among civil society members, there was great reluctance to work with those they had been so critical of, all these years. There was strong resistance to giving up on long held beliefs, convictions and positions, as also the not-uncommon rift within civil society, often a consequence of huge personal egos.

It was my role to gently impress upon everyone that only their working together could provide the solutions the country so urgently needed, given the crisis that they all acknowledged. And that they needed to arrive at a workable consensus on each issue, even where there were major disagreements. Over the course of several months in 2011-12, a new path

was charted out, giving rise to a ten-fold paradigm shift in water management and governance in India (Shah, 2013). For me, the clear sign of success was that the outcome left all sides unhappy! I was happy because I felt each person had shed their pet fundamentalisms!!

We adopted a very similar, deeply consultative process while drafting the new National Water Policy (NWP) in 2019-20. Once again the process was highly contentious, with older members of the water establishment strongly resisting the radical proposals for change. But we got solid support from the younger members of the Central Water Commission, who were keen to become part of a thoroughly revamped world-class organisation, as also from the States who are thirsting for reform. The Committee to draft the new NWP held 16 meetings over the period of one year. It heard and received 124 submissions by experts, academics, practitioners and stakeholders. This included submissions by governments of 21 States and 5 Union Territories and 35 presentations and submissions by departments and ministries of the Government of India. The new NWP was based on a national consensus that was evident from all the inputs received by the Committee.

A New Development Paradigm can only be Founded on a Transformed Consciousness

In the development paradigms of our time, there are those who do not find a place. Their interests are not merely ignored, they are deeply wounded. Among them is the eco-system that nurtures life on earth. The relentless juggernaut of rapacious consumption destroys forests, mines groundwater, pollutes rivers, as also the air we breathe. The well-being of communities who are weak and without a voice, gets trampled over in the process. It is quite evident that unless the voice of the voiceless, invisible people is mobilised, their interests will continue to be ignored and even harmed by the powers-that-be.

While this much is reasonably well recognised, what is not paid equal attention to is that such a transformation needs to be accompanied, rather would only be possible, if there is a transformation in consciousness. We need, therefore, to answer a deeper question: what is the kind of transformed consciousness that is required to break from a culture wedded to endless greed and domination, which appears to thrive on

division rather than harmony and fraternity? My contention is that without a transformed consciousness, it is difficult to imagine the possibility of the new development paradigm that not just India but this world requires. So long as human beings continue to believe that their happiness lies in competitively seeking more and more material prosperity and greater command-and-control over nature, it will remain impossible for humanity to look beyond capitalism. After all, capitalism has proved to be the most efficient economic machine to deliver goals based on human acquisitiveness, unbridled competitiveness and greed. If these fundamental aspirations of people are not altered, if they continue to seek endless joy in external sources, then their suffering and that of the planet cannot be ended.

I derive my inspiration from a long and unbroken chain of social and political activists, including Gandhi, Ambedkar, Paulo Freire, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Thich Nhat Hanh and bell hooks, who centred their attempts at social transformation around a spiritual understanding of the world. They brought to bear reconstructed spiritual resources to address what they saw as the key challenges of their own time and context. Their work shows that without the inner transformation proposed by the science of spirituality, it would prove impossible to build a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity. I would go further and argue that the insights we can draw from this science are critically essential for the very survival of humanity, indeed of all life on earth, in this era of the Anthropocene.

From this pantheon of spiritual political activists, I will share with you today the insights of Babasaheb Ambedkar, the political radicalism of whose spirituality I had occasion to study in some depth while delivering the Commencement Lecture at the Ambedkar University, Delhi a few years ago (Shah, 2019). Ambedkar's spirituality did not allow for a crude separation of the personal and the political. For in his vision, the one was well and truly embedded in the other, with each defining and redefining the other. To put it simply, for Ambedkar, the challenge of social transformation was inextricably bound to the task of inner transformation. One could not happen without the other.

Meaningful politics in an unjust society comprises any endeavour to alter the balance of power in favour of the deprived and oppressed. How radical such an attempt is, turns on how far-reaching a challenge is mounted to these structures of power, how comprehensive, how universal and how enduring is the vision of transformation embedded in this politics. Do we get to experience freedom at the deepest level? Or do we continue to remain caught in the endless cycle of desire, fulfilment and lack -- that becomes an eternal source of bondage and unfreedom, even enslavement, more overpowering than any external servitude? It is this striving that drew Ambedkar to the various religious traditions and finally to Buddhism. As early as 1936, while making a blistering attack on the caste system in his classic work *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar clarified:

“I must not be understood to hold the opinion that there is no necessity for a religion. On the contrary I agree with Burke when he says that true religion is the foundation of society, the basis on which all true Civil Government rests. Indeed, I am so convinced of the necessity of religion that I feel I ought to tell you in outline what I regard as necessary items in this religious reform. . you must give a new doctrinal basis to your religion—a basis that will be in consonance with liberty, equality and fraternity” (Ambedkar, 1936, 24.1, 24.5)

He reiterated this view 20 years later:

“For the religious system although today is unrelated to the secular system, yet is the foundation on which everything secular rests . . . the secular system cannot last very long unless it has got the sanction of the religion however remote it may be” (Ambedkar 1956a)

Lest there be any misunderstanding, let me hasten to clarify that Ambedkar is not here making a case for a theocratic state. His emphasis is on the fostering of values that would engender a humane society, based on loving kindness, an impeccable Buddhist virtue. The question he asked himself was: what would foster such a society, imbued with these values? And his clear answer was that this requires a process of inner transformation, without which all activism and all social engineering would come to nothing. He was drawn to the religious traditions because the change they seek is more fundamental than the one sought by what one

may call the more sectarian movements, each undoubtedly invaluable and extremely challenging in themselves, but finally limited to transforming a specific structure of power, whether based on gender, class, caste, race, region or community.

This also helps us understand Ambedkar's rejection of Marxism (which he considers very seriously) and what makes his spirituality so powerfully radical in political terms. Ambedkar's was a ceaseless struggle to arrive at a body of thought that would enable liberation from the world of sorrow, not only for the Dalits but for all beings on Earth.¹ He was also eagerly committed to the spirit of scientific enquiry. He would persistently question any claim that he found to be humbug.² He was, therefore, drawn to both Marx and the Buddha. Indeed, he argues that there was no fundamental disagreement between Marx and the Buddha on what Ambedkar regarded as the four essential elements of Marxism. But then Ambedkar (1956b) goes on to contrast the means advocated by them:

“The means of bringing about Communism, which the Buddha propounded, were quite definite: the *Pancha Silas*, which address that part of the unhappiness of man that results from his own misconduct, the Noble Eight-Fold Path, which redresses that part of the misery which was the result of man's inequity towards man and the doctrine of *Nibbana*, which outlines the *Asavas*, or Hindrances in the way of the Eight-Fold Path.

The main hindrance is the delusion of self. So long as a man is wholly occupied with himself, chasing after every bauble that he vainly thinks will satisfy the cravings of his heart, there is no noble path for him. Only

¹ Ambedkar (1957): “Maitri is extending fellow feeling to all beings, not only to one who is a friend but also to one who is a foe; not only to man but to all living beings” (p.71). As Teltumbde says, “Ambedkar did not intend Navayana for Dalits only; he meant it as a universal vehicle for the entire humanity” (Teltumbde, 2018).

² “I prefer Buddhism because it gives three principles in combination, which no other religion does. Buddhism teaches *prajna* (understanding as against superstition and supernaturalism), *karuna* (love between people against a slave and master relationship) and *samata* (equality). This is what man wants for a good and happy life on earth.” (Ambedkar, 1956a)

when his eyes have been opened to the fact that he is but a tiny part of a measureless whole, only when he begins to realise how impermanent a thing is his temporary individuality, can he even enter upon this narrow path.”

For this we need the *Paramitas*, the virtues to be practiced in one's daily life. The first is *Khanti* or forbearance, the essence of which is not to meet hatred by hatred. As if speaking directly to us in these hate-filled times, Ambedkar says “For hatred is not appeased by hatred. It is appeased only by forbearance”.

Having clearly explained the path of the Buddha, Ambedkar (1956b) goes on to ask: “We must now consider whose means are more lasting. One has to choose between Government by force and Government by moral disposition”. And he argues,

“The Buddha’s way was not to force people to do what they did not like to do although it was good for them. *His way was to alter the disposition of men so that they would do voluntarily what they would not otherwise want to do.* Society has been aiming to lay a new foundation which was summarised by the French Revolution in three words, Fraternity, Liberty and Equality. The French Revolution was welcomed because of this slogan. It failed to produce equality. We welcome the Russian Revolution because it aims to produce equality. But it cannot be too much emphasised that in producing equality society cannot afford to sacrifice fraternity or liberty. Equality will be of no value without fraternity or liberty. It seems that the three can coexist only if one follows the way of the Buddha. Communism can give one but not all.”

At the same time, Ambedkar (1956c) develops a powerful critique of capitalism:

“There are two forces prevalent in Society: Individualism and Fraternity. Individualism is ever present. Every individual is ever asking ‘I and my neighbours, are we all brothers, are we even fiftieth cousins, am I their keeper, why should I do right to them’ and under the pressure of his own particular interests acting as though he was an end to himself, thereby developing a non-social and even an anti-social self. Fraternity is a force of opposite character. Fraternity is another name for fellow

feeling. It consists in a sentiment which leads an individual to identify himself with the good of others whereby 'the good of others becomes to him a thing naturally and necessarily to be attended to like any of the physical conditions of our existence'. Individualism would produce anarchy. It is only fraternity, which prevents it and helps to sustain the moral order among men. Of this there can be no doubt."

It should be evident then that Ambedkar was very clear that without an inner transformation of the individual, which would nurture a feeling of fraternity among people, social revolutions would remain utterly incomplete and also unsustainable. Force and compulsion, even if moral, would not be able carry change for very long and soon the distortions created by power and the old untransformed values and aspirations would begin to hold sway. So long as we stay committed to more and more consumerism, will we not remain entrapped in capitalism? And with the same set of values, are attempts at creating alternatives to capitalism, not bound to fail? Will freedom ever become possible so long as we remain caged in the tentacles of greed? As Ambedkar (1956a) exclaims,

"Man is unhappy even though he is in the midst of plenty. Unhappiness is the result of greed, and greed is the bane of life of those who have, as well as of those who have not" (p. 98)

Not a Rationalisation of Status Quo

Lest there may be any misunderstanding, let me hasten to state that the degeneration of religious traditions, which has happened to each one of them without exception³, has very much to do with the unholy alliance that has emerged historically between institutionalised religion and the structures of power in society. Which is why a lot of mainstream religious discourse has tended to propose an acceptance of the *status quo* or has been conveniently interpreted as saying so, by the powers-that-be, in order to buttress their power in many historical situations. This is truly

³ Including very sadly Buddhism also, in the 20th and 21st centuries, where violent Buddhist extremists have attacked religious minorities in countries like Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar

ironic because the founders of these religious traditions were all social revolutionaries of their day, advocating the overthrow of oppressive systems of power. The Franciscan friar Richard Rohr (2018) explains this paradox:

“As long as Jesus’ followers were on the bottom and the edge of empire, as long as they shared the rejected and betrayed status of Jesus, they could grasp his teaching more readily. Values like non-participation in war, simple living, inclusivity, and love of enemies could be more easily understood when Christians were gathering secretly in the catacombs, when their faith was untouched by empire, rationalization, and compromise.

In 313, Constantine legalized Christianity. It became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380. After this structural change, Christianity increasingly accepted, and even defended, the dominant social order. The church slowly lost its free and alternative vantage point.

Before 313, the church was on the bottom of society. Within the space of a few decades, the church moved from the bottom to the top, literally from the catacombs to the basilicas. When the Christian church became the established religion of the empire, it started reading the Gospel from the position of maintaining power and social order instead of experiencing the profound power of powerlessness that Jesus revealed.”

Something very similar can be traced in the history of all major religions, which have tended to lose track of their true spirit. As Aurobindo (1991: 225) describes it, society has historically used religion to

“Give an august, awful and would-be eternal sanction to its mass of customs and institutions; it made of them a veil of mystery against human questioning and a shield of darkness against the *innovator*. So far as it saw in religion a means of human salvation and perfection, it laid hands upon it at once to mechanise it, to catch the human soul and bind it on the wheels of a socio-religious machinery, to impose on it, in the place of *spiritual freedom*, an imperious yoke and an iron prison. It saddled upon the religious life of man, a Church, a priesthood and a mass of ceremonies and set over it a pack of watchdogs under the name of creeds and dogmas, dogmas which one had to accept and obey under pain of condemnation to eternal hell by an eternal judge

beyond . . . This false socialisation of religion has been always the chief cause of its failure to regenerate mankind.”

On the other hand, as Aurobindo (1991: 228) further explains, the spiritual core of religion seeks to do exactly the opposite:

“Neither in the individual nor in the society will it seek to imprison, wall in, repress, impoverish, but to let in the widest air and the highest light. A large liberty will be the law of a spiritual society and the increase of freedom a sign of the growth of human society towards the possibility of true spiritualization”

The challenge, then, is to acknowledge, with clear and open sight, exactly what went wrong with religion, but recognize and recover what is invaluable in each of these spiritual traditions. While I do regard, with Vivekananda and Aurobindo, religion to be one of the, if not the most destructive force in human history,⁴ I affirm the validity of all these alternative paths, each one attempting to restate the same fundamental insight in their own inimitable ways. My own inclination is like that of Raimon Panikkar (2010), a Spanish-Indian Roman Catholic priest, a great proponent of what he called “intra-religious dialogue”, who once said “I left Europe [for India] as a Christian, I discovered I was a Hindu and returned as a Buddhist, without ever having ceased to be Christian”. The most powerful statement of this perspective is by Swami Vivekananda in his lecture on *The Way to the Realisation of a Universal Religion* at the Universalist Church, Pasadena, California, on the 28th of January, 1900 (Vivekananda, Vol 1 2007:5)

“I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian’s church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the

⁴ “No other human motive has deluged the world with blood so much as religion. Nothing makes us so cruel as religion, and nothing makes us so tender as religion.” (Vivekananda, 2007). “Religion, which ought to have led the way as a teacher of unity, has been as much, or even more, a sower of discord” (Aurobindo, 1950, p. 281)

Buddhistic temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his Law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu. Not only shall I do all these, but I shall keep my heart open for all that may come in the future. Is God's book finished? Or is it still a continuous revelation going on? It is a marvellous book — these spiritual revelations of the world. The Bible, the Vedas, the Koran, and all other sacred books are but so many pages, and an infinite number of pages remain yet to be unfolded. I would leave my heart open for all of them.”

What Spirituality has to Offer

Spirituality is based on repeated and creative experimentation carried out over thousands of years by pioneers across spiritual traditions. The aim of spirituality is to provide a pathway towards personal transformation that helps build the inner strength, courage and poise that enables seekers to negotiate what the Bhagavad Gita (Chapter 3, Verse 15) has called this “abode of transience and sorrow” (*dukhaalayam ashaashvatam*) or what the Buddha in the *Lokavipatti Sutta* describes as the vicissitudes (winds) of life: “loss and gain, disrepute and fame, praise and blame, pleasure and pain” (Bhikkhu, 1997).

There is a rich diversity of practices across multiple spiritual traditions, ranging from meditation, breathing techniques, mantras⁵, rituals, prayers

⁵ Many of the foundational texts of the science (across traditions) were, in the first place, *Śruti*, or heard revelations. “Śruti is the process of the sound becoming the word . . . The Vedas as texts may be old collections of words, but the knowledge arising from sound contained in them is eternal. The source of the word is sound, which is ever-present and available. . . The purpose of sādhanā is to move from word to sound, where we may gain access to eternal knowledge.” (Chinnaiyan, 2022: 53). Aurobindo explains the power of the sound of the mantra: “The Rig Veda rises out of the ancient Dawn with the sound of a thousand-voiced hymn lifted from the soul of man to an all-creative Truth and an all-illuminating Light . . . the word is a living thing, a thing of power, creative, formative . . . as living or even a more living force than its idea; sound determines sense” (Aurobindo 1995: 222). As Om Swami says: “The energy of the mantras is aimed at calling upon the universal energy, a way of drawing its attention towards us. Mantra yoga is a path to strengthen your bond with the universal energy around you, so you may realize

and *koan* study⁶ to martial arts⁷ and so on. Each tradition invites us to experiment with these prescribed practices, and then through our own experience of their effectiveness for inner transformation and building inner strength, we can decide whether to accept or reject them.

This knowledge is replicable, verifiable and falsifiable.⁸ As Vivekananda (2007) says,

Our business is to verify, not to swallow. Religion, like other sciences, requires you to gather facts, to see for yourself, and this is possible when you go beyond the knowledge which lies in the region of the five senses. Religious truths need verification by everyone (p.133)

The only requirement, of course, is that we remain open to the possibility of discovering the truth on this path and that we don't reject it without even giving it a try. For we must always acknowledge that the intransigence of atheism can be as virulent as the obduracy of religious fanaticism.

your own potential" (Swami, 2017, p.8). I have some personal experience of this through my daily sadhana of the *Lalita Sahasranama*, the thousand names of the Supreme Goddess. "The Word was regarded as a symbol of the Godhead, or more exactly as revealing the divine presence within the cosmos, as the force that creates, maintains, and upholds the universe. . . the Word is an energy, that may be tapped and used by anyone who is able to penetrate its secret nature and mysteries" (Padoux, 1990, pp.x-xi)

⁶ See Sutherland (2022) for an account of the powerful transformative impact of *koan* study.

⁷ Peter Ralston (2010) brings out the power of this path based on his own long years of experience in Judo, Jujitsu, Karate, Kempo, Ch'uan Fa and Northern Sil Lum Kung Fu. His interest in the "internal" martial arts led him to study T'ai Chi Ch'uan, Hsing I Ch'uan, and Pa Kua Chang

⁸ Falsifying becomes even more important here because the spiritual traditions, precisely owing to their huge potential power, have spawned many fakes and pretenders, who have greatly damaged their credibility!

Conclusion

When we examine the dominant values that have animated society in the 20th and 21st centuries, we find Ayn Rand's "virtue of selfishness", imposition of sameness in both McDonaldised global capitalism and totalitarian states, intensifying hatred for excluded minorities, the strident assertiveness of certainty of knowledge and the dominion over Nature (which spans both the Left and the Right). The consequences of these are also vividly before us: the continual crises afflicting global capitalism, a planet in serious danger through the destruction caused by a certain vision of science and technology, as also growing inequality and violence within society. Challenges to capitalism from the Left have sadly met exactly the fate that Ambedkar described and anticipated. The vacuum is increasingly filled by forces of hatred from the Right.

Surely, the time is ripe for a serious reconsideration of the way forward. The spiritual tradition of the Buddha proposes a vision of a deeply inter-connected cosmos, where "you are, therefore, I am". Buddhism, like many other spiritual traditions, teaches that all life is inter-related.

"All things, mutually supportive and related, form a living cosmos, a single living whole. By engaging ourselves with others, our identity is developed, established and enhanced. As the 13th century Japanese Buddhist monk Nichiren wrote, 'If you light a lamp for another, your own way will be lit.' We then also understand that it is impossible to build our own happiness on the unhappiness of others" (Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, 1997).

We can clearly see that by ourselves we are incomplete and we need others and partnerships with them to bring real joy into this world. It is truly ironic that Ambedkarite activism has given rise to a "politics of identity" quite different from the one he would have wished for. Working for the *annihilation* of caste, what Ambedkar would have wanted is the assertion of an identity that affirmed the oneness of all existence, in recognition of its inter-dependence and inter-connectedness, beyond the separate self. Only on this basis would we be able to live a life animated by the key Buddhist (and universal spiritual) principles of *karuna* (bearing the

suffering of others as one's own) and *upekkha* (cultivating the necessary detachment), without which it would become impossible for us to have the requisite energy to sustain the struggle for change, as also to bring it to a creative fruition.

This organic link between inner transformation of the individual and larger social change postulated by Ambedkar is invariably missing in our politics. As a result, we view conflict as an arena of our victory over the "other." A conflict needs not so much a victory, as a resolution. Indeed, a "defeat" that moves society forward on the moral landscape, that empowers the disadvantaged and sensitises those in power, deepening democracy in the process, could even be preferred to a "victory" that fails to achieve any of these.

A key to moving forward in this direction is to give up the antediluvian, unitary and insurrectionist conception of Revolution (with a capital R). The unique appeal of "scientific socialism" was its claim to have discovered the "law of motion of modern society" that definitively predicted the inexorable coming of a new dawn. As Ambedkar argued, this teleology has ended up becoming the chief weakness of Marxism. If change is visualised in these terms, means-ends questions will be run roughshod over and horrors of the Stalinist kind will continue to be perpetrated.

We must also firmly abandon the "victim" mode. Those suffering injustice are not completely constituted by their affliction. Their identity is beyond that constructed for them by their oppressor. But both the dehumanising experience of pain and the utter obduracy of their persecutors, appear to push the oppressed, as Paulo Freire suggests, with an apparent historical inevitability, into the language of the tormentor. At the root of this desperation is an overestimation of the potency of violence and a lack of recognition that power is a relationship with an immeasurable and unknowably indeterminate fluidity and vulnerability. The sterility of unidirectional oppositional politics is evident in the presumption that change flows from one direction alone. But there are huge possibilities of visualising change from different vantage points, of flows of knowledge, insight and power from multiple directions. We need a vision of transformation that threads all these potentialities 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 darkneses of our time but to seize the light that still shines within. The science of spirituality offers an alternative path of humility, restraint, freedom, creativity and joy. Humanity, in stewardship of the earth, would do well to heed this counsel – before it is too late!

References

- Altieri, M.A. and C. I. Nicholls (2020). “Agroecology and the Reconstruction of a Post-COVID-19 Agriculture,” *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol 47, No 5, pp 881–98
- Ambedkar, B.R. (1956). *Why I Like Buddhism and How It Is Useful to the World in Its Present Circumstances*, BBC talk
- Ambedkar, B.R. (1936). *The Annihilation of Caste*
- Ambedkar, B.R. (1956b). *Buddha or Karl Marx*
- Ambedkar, B.R. (1956c). *The Philosophy of Hinduism*
- Ambedkar, B.R. (1957). *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Siddhartha College Publications
- Ang, Yuen Yuen (2025). ‘Adaptive Political Economy: Toward a New Paradigm’, *World Politics*, Vol.77
- Bhikkhu, Ṭhānissaro (1997). *Lokavipatti Sutta: The Failings of the World*, (AN 8:6), webpage, https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/AN/AN8_6.html
- Brown, Kate (2020). “The Pandemic Is Not a Natural Disaster,” *New Yorker*, 13 April, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/the-pandemic-is-not-a-natural-disaster>.
- Chinnaiyan, Kavitha (2022). *Fractals of Reality: Living the Śrīcakra*, Chicago: Sfaim Press.
- Freire, Paulo (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Continuum
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg (1960). *Truth and Method*, New York, Continuum
- hooks, bell (2013). *Writing beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*, Routledge

- Horst, W, J. Rittel & M. Melvin (1973). 'Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning'. *Policy Sciences*. 4 (2): 155–169
- Jarvis, T et al (2005). 'International Borders, Ground Water Flow and Hydroschizophrenia', *Ground Water*, Vol.43, No.5
- Luther, Martin Luther (1967). *Where Do We Go From Here?*, in J M Washington (ed.) (1986). *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr*
- Padoux, Andre (1990). *Vāc – The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras*, New York: State University of New York Press
- Panikkar, Raimon (2010). *The Rhythm of Being*, The Gifford Lectures, Orbis Books
- Ralston, Peter (2010). *The Book of Not Knowing: Exploring the True Nature of Self, Mind, and Consciousness*, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books
- Rockstrom, J. et al (2009). 'A Safe Operating Space for Humanity', *Nature*, 23rd September
- Rohr, Richard (2018). *Early Christianity A Changing Religion*, Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, September 3
- Rohr, Richard (2023). *Inside/Outside People*, Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, September 11
- Shackle, G.L.S. (1972). *Epistemics and Economics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shah, Mihir (2010). 'The Power of Uncertainty: Reflections on the Nature of Transformational Initiatives', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19 June
- Shah, Mihir (2013). 'Water: Towards a Paradigm Shift in the Twelfth Plan', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19 January
- Shah, Mihir (2019). The Political Radicalism of Ambedkar's Spirituality, *The India Forum*, April
- Shah, Mihir (2024). Social and Spiritual Transformation: An Imperative Complementarity, *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 27
- Sri Aurobindo (1950). *The Ideal of Human Unity*, EP Dutton
- Sri Aurobindo (1991). *The Human Cycle*, Puducherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publications
- Sri Aurobindo (1995). *Secret of the Veda*, Lotus Press: Kindle Edition
- Sutherland, Joan (2022). *Through Forests of Every Color—Awakening with Koans*, Colorado: Shambhala.

- Swami, Om (2017). *The Ancient Science of Mantras*, Black Lotus. Kindle Edition
- Teltumbde, Anand (2018). 'Strategy of Conversion to Buddhism: Intent and Aftermath', in Yengde and Teltumbde (eds) (2018)
- Vivekananda, Swami (2007). *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Mayavati Memorial Edition. 9 vols. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama
- Zwartaveen, Margreet (2011). 'Questioning Masculinities in Water', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30th April

DURGABAI DESHMUKH MEMORIAL LECTURE SERIES

Since 1992, the Council for Social Development has been organising annual lectures in Dr. Durgabai Deshmukh's honour. These lectures cover practically every major domain of social development. Those who have delivered these lectures have come from varied background and expertise. The list of Durgabai Memorial Lectures from previous years are as follows:

Year	Speaker	Topic
2025	Surinder S. Jodhka	Cast(e)ing the State Policy Aspiration, Identities and Democratic Politics
2024	Madhura Swaminathan	The Agrarian Economy: Perceptions versus Reality
2023	K. Srinath Reddy	Decoding and Delivering Public Health
2022	Ravi Srivastava	Migration, Informality, and the Growing Precarity of Work
2021	Yoginder K. Alagh	The Janus Face of Agricultural Policies – Kisan and Sethias Local and Global
2020	Ashok Khosla	Are Today's Crises Catastrophic Enough for Neoclassical Economists and Neoliberal Politicians to Change Their Minesets?
2019	Hiren Gohain	The Heritage & Prospects of Democracy
2018	Rehman Sobhan	Human Insecurity in South Asia: Challenging Market Injustice
2017	P. Sainath	The Moral Economy of the Elite and Why They can't Confront the Inequality That is Our Greatest Crisis
2016	Flavia Agnes	Has Codified Hindu Law Changed Gender Relationships?
2015	Abhijit Sen	Demographic Drivers of Economic Growth – Role of Human Capital
2014	N. C. Saxena	Challenges of Good Governance
2013	S.K. Thorat	Growth and Its Pro-Poor Character in India 1993-2010
2012	Narendra Jadhav	Reforms in the Higher Education System and 12 th Five Year Plan

2011	Devaki Jain	What is Wrong with Economics? Can the Aam Aurat Redefine Economic Reasoning?
2010	Gail Omvedt	Caste in the Census
2009	Shanta Sinha	Deficit Childhood: Implications for India's Democracy
2008	Randhir Singh	Indian Politics in the Age of Globalisation
2007	Mahasweta Devi	Fundamental Human Rights for the Nautch Girls of Purulia
2006	Aruna Roy	Democracy Work
2005	Munda Ram Dayal	Globalisation and the Challenges of Tribal Development
2004	Anil Sadgopal	Globalisation: Demystifying its Knowledge Agenda for Education Policy
2003	Pushpa Bhargava	The Promise and Problems of Today's Biology and Biotechnology and Their Applications
2002	Mashirul Hasan	Islam Culture & Politics: Awadh Society in 20 th Century
2001	N.H. Anita	Women and Health
2000	Leela Dubey	Social Development and Social Research
1999	M.N. Venkatachaliah	Human Rights and Women in India
1998	Swami Agnivesh	Towards a Spiritual Society
1997	Leila Seth	The Girl Child and Social Development
1996	Vandana Shiva	Trading Our Lives Away: Free Trade, Women and Ecology
1995	Kiran Bedi	Concept of Management in Government
1994	Karan Singh	Population and Social Development in India
1993	Vina Majumdar	Women and the Political Process
1992	Suma Chitnis	Institutionalisation of Social Purpose

Soft copies of the above lectures are available at the following link:

<https://www.csdindia.org/ddml2/>



Dr. Mihir Shah is one of India's leading scholars, practitioners and policy-makers on water management and rural livelihoods. He is Distinguished Professor, Shiv Nadar University, where he has pioneered a first-of-its-kind MA in Rural Management program, focused on students from the most disadvantaged regions and communities of the country.

From 2009 to 2014 he was Member, Planning Commission, Government of India, handling the portfolios of Water Resources, Rural Development and Panchayati Raj. Dr Shah was chiefly responsible for drafting the paradigm shift in the management of water resources outlined in the 12th Five Year Plan. He also initiated a makeover of MGNREGA, the largest employment program in human history, with an emphasis on rural livelihoods based on construction of productive assets. From 2019 to 2021 he chaired the Government of India's Committee to draft the new National Water Policy. This is the first time ever that a person from outside government was asked to chair this committee.

Dr Shah graduated in Economics from St. Stephen's College, Delhi University, where he won the prestigious KC Nag Economics Prize and did his post-graduation from the Delhi School of Economics, where he was Merit Scholar. He wrote a much-acclaimed doctoral dissertation at the Centre for Development Studies, Kerala. After teaching for some years at the Centre, he resigned to explore fresh terrain beyond the ivory towers of conventional academia. Inspired by the life and work of Baba Amte, he co-founded Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS) in 1990, headquartered in a remote Adivasi village of Madhya Pradesh. SPS is today one of India's largest grass-roots initiatives for water and livelihood security. As part of Team SPS, Dr. Shah lived and worked with India's Adivasi communities for over three decades, in the hinterlands of central India, forging the outlines of a new paradigm of development.

Dr Shah was the first President of the Bharat Rural Livelihoods Foundation (2013-19), which supports innovative civil society action in Adivasi regions. He was the first Chair of the Revitalising Rainfed Areas (RRA) Network (2014-18) and the National Coalition for Natural Farming (NCNF) (2021-26). He is a Founding Signatory of the Geneva Actions on Human Water Security, 2017. He was a Member of the International Steering Committee of the CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE) from 2012 to 2018.

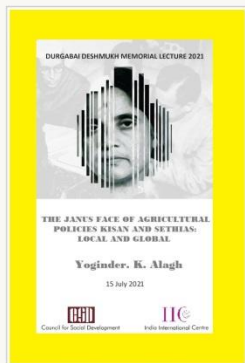
Dr. Shah has addressed audiences on his life's work all over the world from Stanford University to the World Bank in Washington, the OECD in Paris, the Arctic Circle in Iceland, Chatham House and University College, London and University of Cambridge, England, UNESCO-IHE, Delft, International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, Austria, the EAT Forum, Stockholm, Rachel Carson Centre, Munich, Sichuan University, China, International Water Management Institute, Colombo, the Asian Development Bank, Manila, the Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok and the Singapore Water Week. He was the Keynote Speaker at the Global Water Summit at Rome in 2012 and the International Eco Summit Congress at Montpellier in 2016.

His research has been published extensively in pre-eminent journals such as Economic and Political Weekly, Current Science, Ambio, Hydrogeology Journal, Journal of Hydrology, Ecology, Economy and Society, The India Forum, Contributions to Indian Sociology, Review of Development and Change, International Journal of Rural Management, Seminar and Indian Journal of Labour Economics.

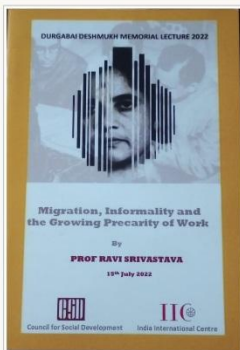
DURGABAI DESHMUKH MEMORIAL LECTURE

FIVE YEARS OF IDEAS: 2021 - 2025

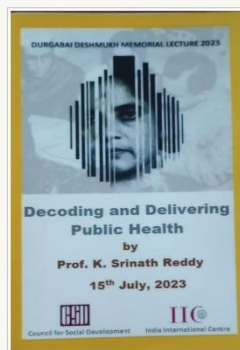
Council for Social Development • India International Centre



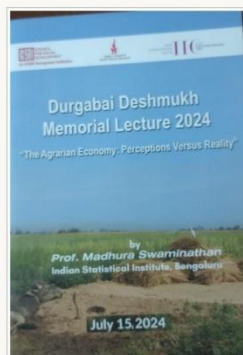
2021



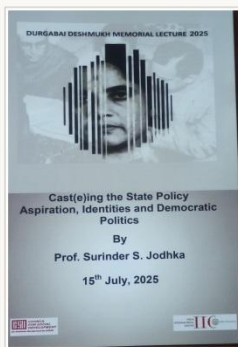
2022



2023

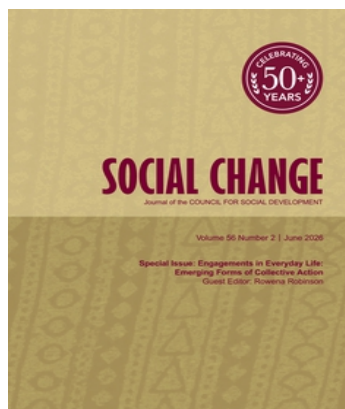
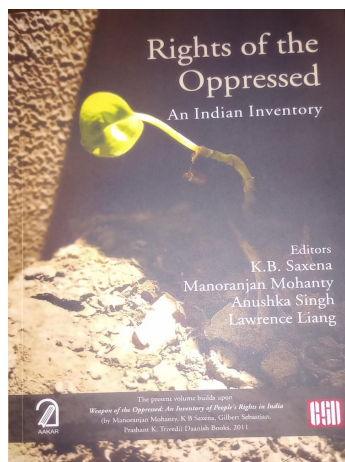
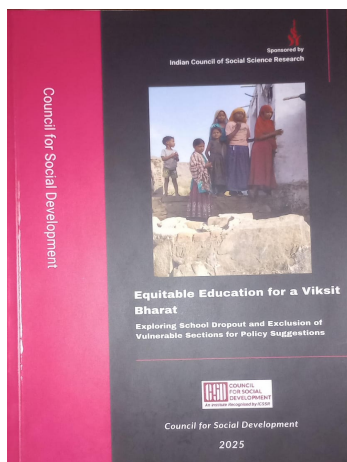


2024



2025

Celebrating five years of scholarship, dialogue and public engagement



COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT



NEW DELHI

Council for Social Development
Sangha Rachana
53, Lodi Estate, K K Birla Lane
New Delhi - 110003

 +91-11-2461 1700, 2469 3065

 csdnd@csdindia.org,
director@csdindia.org



HYDERABAD

Council for Social Development
Southern Regional Centre
5-6-151, Rajendranagar
Hyderabad 500030

 +91-40-2401 6395

 director@csdhyd.org