



DURGA INDIA'S MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

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# DURGA DARES



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# FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

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Happy new year, everyone! As we strengthen our commitment to gender justice this year, Durga is also building conversations with like minded women on feminist topics and debates - of which one is leisure.

Our deliberation around leisure has been around the following questions: Who enjoys it the most? Is it affected by marginality? Should leisure be institutionalised? What happens when governments take note of leisure and grant it to women, for whom the lack of it is a concern?

For this volume, Durga was in conversation with a trailblazing change maker, Surabhi Yadav, to discuss Project Basanti: Women at Leisure, and about dreams and hopes we harbour for women in our lives, and women around the globe. This edition has heart, soul and a lot of care, so we hope you have fun with this volume; as much as we've enjoyed curating it!

*Winnie Pande*

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## WOMEN AT WORK: THROUGH OUR LENS

SUBMITTED BY LIKHITHA SHETTY, PROGRAM FACILITATOR AT DURGA INDIA. IN THE FIRST FRAME, WE HAVE OUR PARTICIPANT WARMLY EMBRACED BY OUR PARTNER FROM CGI, ASHWINI. IN THE SECOND FRAME, LIKHITHA CAPTURED POURAKARMIKAS AS THEY SAT BRAIDING FRAGRANT GAJRAS BEFORE HER SESSION WITH THEM COMMENCED.





# SPARKING EQUALITY: A LIGHTED PATHWAY TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

**Written by: Shreya (Intern at Durga India)**

Indeed, the dance of the world towards gender equality has made some steps, but the rhythm is still far to be caught.

Picture this: a collage of actions that is woven together by governments, activists, and communities, all dancing to the tune of change. From rewriting outdated legislation to challenging social norms, the ground is now open for change-makers to clear the way for change.

Think of it as a remix of empowerment: It's about the intensity of education and employment, ensuring every woman is featured in that spotlight. And women's sexual and reproductive well-being should not be forgotten—we have a smash-hit!

But this isn't just a solo act; it's a group number where everyone gets to groove. It's about breaking down barriers, amplifying voices, and handing the mic to women in leadership roles. Because when women have a seat at the table, the whole song sounds sweeter.

As an incessant beat, we shall quake the patriarchal norms and formulate a world in which women are upright and empowered in all of its aspects. In addition, once we dance collectively to equality, the music never stops.





## WOMEN AT WORK: THROUGH DURGA'S LENS

CAPTURED ARE OUR SESSIONS IN PROGRESS, ACROSS COMMUNITIES WE WORK WITH: BBMP, BMTC, TEACHERS, STAFF AND COMMUNITY WOMEN. OUR SESSIONS INSTIL CONFIDENCE IN WORKING WOMEN TO OCCUPY WORKSPACES WITH AGENCY.







# WOMEN AT LEISURE

Durga sat down with Surabhi Yadav, in a two part interview, to discuss Project Basanti, and about dreams of a world that places leisure on priority. **Part I of the interview is in the next couple of pages; part II will be out in the next volume.**







**I am a *sapnewaali* ; someone who has a fire in her belly. Creating is how I understand life; how I enjoy it.**

**Winnie: Surabhi, how would you introduce yourself and the work that you do?**

**Surabhi:** I am a sapnewaali. I've got a fire in my belly and I love creating! That's how I understand life, and that's how I enjoy life. A lot of my creations are at the intersection of gender and rural development, and a big part of my work is creating solutions for rural women, and with rural women. We keep joy, community and ambition at the heart of the work we do. This has manifested in two initiatives; Sajhe Sapne and Project Basanti.

In Sajhe Sapne, I work with other sapnewalis, who are rural women, between 18-23 years of age and help them launch their careers in the modern world.

Then, of course there's Project Basanti: Women at Leisure, which is a one of a kind collection of videos and photos of women and girls taking out time for themselves - at leisure. It is that project which is widely known now, and exploring various themes; time as a feminist issue, leisure as a feminist issue, what does leisure even mean for women? That's about me.

**Winnie: So how did Project Basanti start?**

**Surabhi:** It's named after my mother, Basanti. I lost my mother when I was 23, and when she died, one of the realisations that dawned upon me was that I did not really know her as a person. I knew her as my mother, but it was limited to the dynamic that she and I shared, not even what she and my siblings shared.

I started interviewing the people in her life about what they remembered of her. That prompt was powerful. It would lead people to the most dominant image of my mother that they remembered. One of the aunties, Gangle Aunty, with whom my mother used to hang out every evening, said to me, "Bhabhi toh bohot mastikhor aur mazakiya thi!" (Your mother was so mischievous and funny!) and I was surprised.

“Babli is engrossed in journaling her thoughts on a beautiful sunny day in a village in Himachal.





Those 2 words; *mastikhor* and *mazakiya*, that came to her mind, were not what I associated with my mother. For me, my mother was a disciplinarian; a taskmaster, who had to manage 4 kids and finish up chores. She was uprooted from her village when she was in 8th grade, after which she had built a life with her husband and kids in a new place. She was there to keep things in order and to keep things right. In fact, she used to keep us from doing this ‘masti’ that aunty spoke of.

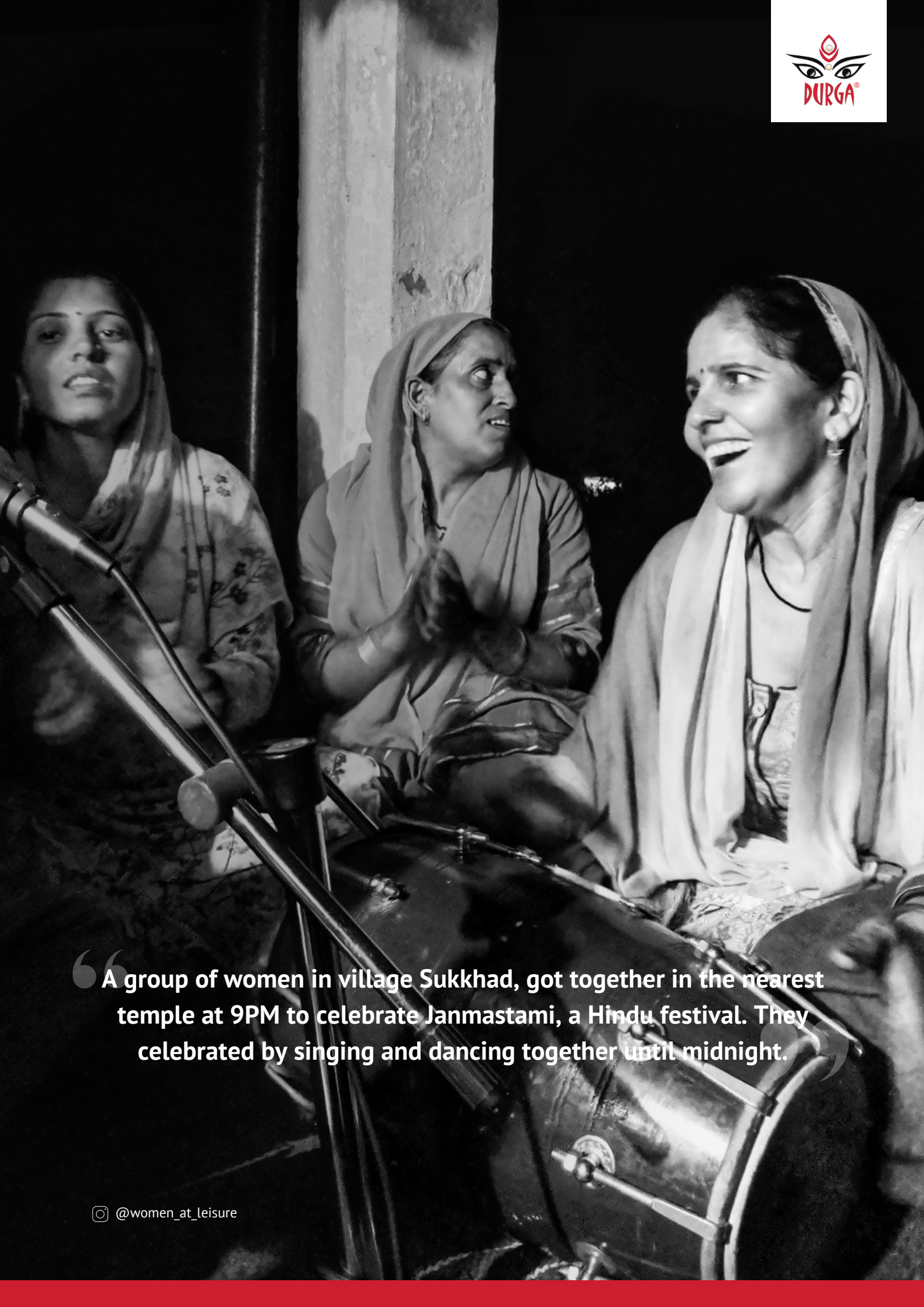
**“*Bhabhi toh bohot mastikhor aur mazakiya thi!*” And those 2 words were not what I associated with my mother.**

Those words were so powerful and refreshing for me that I continued my conversation with Gangle Aunty to ask what she meant. She said “*Arey, shaam ko toh bhabhi neeche aati thi*, and we all would talk about what what was going wrong in our lives. Then, your mother would crack jokes and make us laugh. Your mother’s job was to make all of us laugh.”

**Winnie: Oh wow. Did you start to relate to this image then?**

**Surabhi:** Actually, during Rang Panchami, I remembered my mother like this image that Gangle Aunty had described. She would role play as a drunk husband, a mother in law; and be so immersed in this play. She would create this fun chaos and I remember it! I grew up watching it! And it would be that one special day in the year where I’d see her like this, and the other aunties would join in. The roots of this *natak* were in her Bundelkhandi roots where as a result of women being restricted, vibrant rituals have been created where women really subvert social performances.

*That’s when it hit me - I didn’t know who my mother was, when she wasn’t being my mother. And that led to the question - what did other aunties, like my mother, do when their guards were down? When they were at leisure? I couldn’t ask my mother that. So I started photographing my sister’s life, who was closer to my mother than I was in a lot of ways - she managed the house, had kids, and had a full time job. What did she do for leisure? What did she do when she wasn’t playing a role?*



“A group of women in village Sukkhad, got together in the nearest temple at 9PM to celebrate Janmastami, a Hindu festival. They celebrated by singing and dancing together until midnight.”





I also started asking these questions of the women my mother knew in Bundelkhand. Once the photo project started, I couldn't not see it in everyday life. Everywhere I went, I started to view life with this newfound curiosity; this lens of leisure. It started as an intimate enquiry, sure. But now, it has become a larger enquiry about exploring leisure for different contexts - caste, class, gender, how leisure takes shape and form. How are women subverting leisure in different forms?

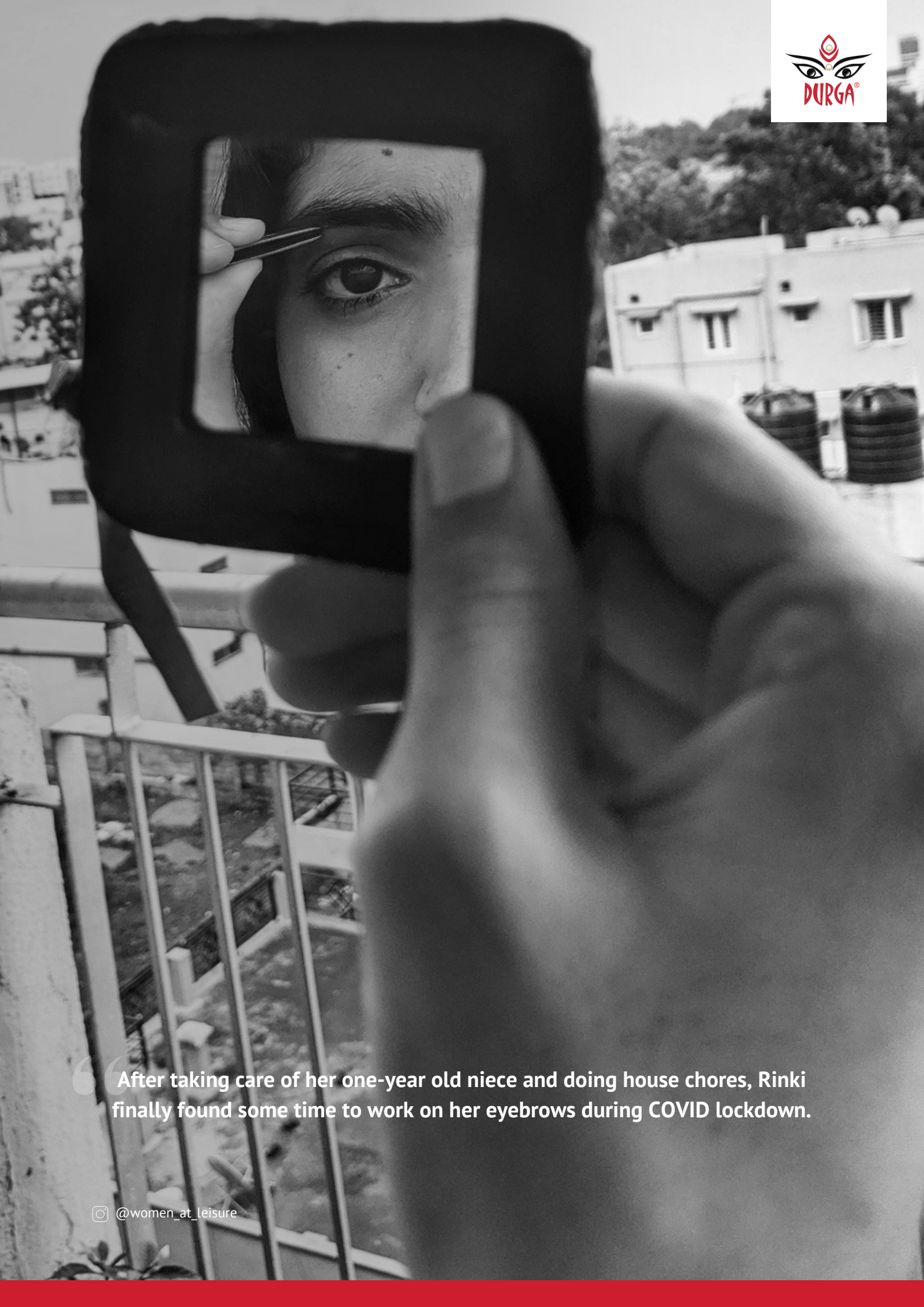
**“It started as an intimate enquiry, but now, it has become a larger enquiry about exploring leisure for different contexts like caste, class, gender; how leisure takes shape and form.”**

**Winnie: What do you think will let women experience leisure to its fullest potential?**

**Surabhi:** I think I'll answer this in terms of policy and practice. Let's see life as policy and practice for this question, and what needs to happen at an individual, institutional and a collective level. First off, there needs to be acknowledgement that there is a problem. If that is not identified, how will we get to a solution? That's what Basanti has done; it has clearly identified that something is missing. A woman reading a newspaper is an ordinary act, as is a woman sleeping or eating. But seeing a woman sleep in the middle of the day while someone else is doing the work is an extraordinary image because it doesn't usually happen.

Acknowledge that not having leisure is a problem ; and that sneaking around it or stealing it should not be normalised - it is my right. I deserve it.

To some extent, this has happened through the Time Use Survey, in which it is clearly specified how caregiving is done disproportionately by men and women or unpaid farm work is done by women, not men. At the individual level, I think we need a language around leisure and a gaze around it, which I see happening through Basanti. Basically, a shared identifier of a shared problem.



“ After taking care of her one-year old niece and doing house chores, Rinki finally found some time to work on her eyebrows during COVID lockdown.

📷 @women\_at\_leisure





Now, of course, there will be solutions. My way is to build a public narrative around leisure, talk about it, take it to as many people as possible and that is heartening - so many research studies have come up as a result of this project; theatre, art, music, dance.

At the policy level, if the government puts it as their agenda that our women's wellbeing is important, then leisure will become a part of policy. For example, structurally, in our workplaces we don't have a lot of infrastructure for mothers, which is half of our working population. Then, what is the message we're sharing? It's that the government will not provide something fundamental to this population's needs, which will end in women being burdened at home and at work.

I personally want to create a national leisure hour; where between 5 - 6:30, people can do whatever they want to do, leaving their phone aside. If we create a public narrative around leisure, and a social custom around it, wouldn't that be fabulous?

Then there are structural changes in public spaces that I'd like to see; for example when you go to Marine Drive in Mumbai, a lot of families, lovers, and children are there in that space, and it is becoming this free flowing space where people are at ease; accessible across caste, class and age groups.

Oaxaca, Mexico, which I visited a couple of years back, had leisure spaces built into the city, which was my leisure heaven! That's how customs are built, right? How do you bring these physical spaces into design - at home, at work, in society - that's something we have to co-create and discuss. **That's what both of our work is doing - defining the problem clearly, showing the ways it impacts us and offering a beautiful solution that invites everyone for deliberation.**

**I want to build a public narrative around leisure, talk about it, take it to as many people as possible, see it in law and policy.**





A woman's ask for leisure is nothing short of a fundamental human right; which she doesn't need to do in hiding. The joy that leisure brings is unparalleled, unlike any material joy one can buy. How can we rid women of the guilt which comes with being at leisure, across marginalities? This is a conversation Durga will take up next month with Surabhi, with whom we are now planning long term collaborations which place safety and leisure at the focus.

- Winnie Pande (Communications Lead at Durga)



# BURIED TALES

Illustrations: Lalithashree Ganesh. Concept: Winnie Pande





# A MILLION TOUCHES

**Written by: Likhitha Shetty, Program Facilitator at Durga India**

In the shadows of unwelcome hands,  
A million touches, not as I planned.  
From loved ones to kin so dear,  
Each touch leaves scars; they won't disappear.

No amount of scrubbing makes them fade,  
These marks of pain, they never trade.  
I voiced my truth, but met with cruel disdain,  
Branded a whore for daring to break tradition's chain.

Still, I stand tall, not giving in,  
For every touch, I'll fight to win.  
For sisters worldwide, I'll take a stand,  
Against the darkness, I'll raise my hand.

Though fear may whisper, deep within,  
I'll rise, unyielding, strong within.  
Knowing I may face it once more,  
But not broken, not like before.

*We also wanted to take this opportunity to thank our partners: Kantar India Foundation, the CSR arm of Kantar India; Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies; CGI, and Utopia India Pvt Limited for their support to Durga's cause.*

**KANTAR**



**CGI**

