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Feminist

October 14, 2023

This Navratri, I'm Celebrating Being 'Difficult'!

If we want to speak up, be confident, and change the world for the better, we need to do what Saraswati did.

Nivedita Ramesh

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Recently, when I was researching a fictional story about strong women, I came across Navratri's historical relationship with goddesses in various forms.

That's when I stumbled upon Saraswati's Puranic origins in The Book of Devi, by Bulbul Sharma.

According to the book, Saraswati is the only Vedic-era goddess revered even today.

She is the presiding deity of knowledge and the arts. Usually depicted as benevolent and smiling, she's always simply dressed, and known to prefer white sarees. But the Puranas show a different side of this goddess.

Saraswati, the vocal goddess

Depending on which Purana you read, Saraswati was either Vishnu's wife or Brahma's wife. But the common thread that connects these stories is **her outspokenness and fiery temper**. In the Devi Bhagavata Purana, Saraswati is one of Vishnu's three wives, the other two being Ganga and Lakshmi.

She doesn't like sharing her husband, and says so, loudly and clearly. Ganga and Lakshmi try to pacify her, saying that they were all sisters and that Vishnu loves them equally. Saraswati disagrees angrily, and curses Ganga and Lakshmi to earth, because 'he was my lord and you took him from me'. By the time Vishnu intervenes, the argument has escalated, and Ganga has cursed Saraswati to earth too. Lakshmi is distraught and begs him to reverse the curses. She can't bear to be separated from him, she says. Vishnu lovingly explains to her that this was a turn of fate. He says that a part of all three of them will continue to remain with him. But only Lakshmi, the 'embodiment of womanly grace and kindness, who glows with compassion, who is great and all forgiving' will be reunited with him after 1000 years.

The story ends with the goddesses moving to Earth to fulfill their destinies. As he promised, till today, Lakshmi is considered Vishnu's consort.

Saraswati, the unforgiving goddess

In the other story from the Skanda Purana, Brahma and his wife Saraswati descend to Pushkar for a ceremony to bestow the earth with rain.



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When it's time to start, Saraswati is nowhere to be seen. A **wife's presence is deemed necessary**, so a priest goes to fetch her. He comes back with the message that she needs more time to get ready and that she has to 'arrange household affairs'. Brahma is so angry at Saraswati's reply, that he marries the first woman the God Indra finds for him. That is Gayatri, a milkmaid. Saraswati arrives just as the marriage vows are completed. She fumes at Brahma for betraying her, curses everyone present for being complicit in 'such a sinful act', and walks out. The Padma Purana has an alternate ending where Vishnu appeases her and she agrees to live with Gayatri as Brahma's wife.

But her rage at his remarriage is very much a part of the story.

Opinionated women are 'difficult'

The Puranas are thousands of years old, and angry, opinionated women have been portrayed as disruptive and unreasonable since then. Still, knowing that a benign, selfless and generous goddess can become furious enough to make the gods tremble helped me feel good about being 'difficult'.

I was known as a difficult child who never did what I was told and always had my own ideas about how to do things.

When I negotiated for a better payout with an ex-employer, they asked me why I was 'making things difficult'.

When I argued for my views to be heard in my family, I was told, 'You are fighting with everyone, so you are the problem'.

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felt I deserved, and I insisted on it. In other words, I wasn't what a daughter, wife, daughter-in-law or mother was expected to be.

Helen Lewis expresses this sentiment in her book Difficult Women: '... Most revolutionaries are not ... nice. And women have always been told to be nice. ... If we raise our voices, we are shrill. Our ambition is suspicious. Our anger is portrayed as unnatural, horrifying, disfiguring.... Changing the world is difficult.'

Change begins with me

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I set out to change my immediate world. My fights have been few, small and private, but they weren't without rewards. I got the payout I asked for, and now I have a voice at home. More importantly, I am **slowly accepting that I need to speak up**, and that the world needs to hear it.

On most days this fight is like pushing a concrete building with my bare hands. On others, I've taken one step forward but also had to take two steps backward. At this time I tell myself that we can't expect change to happen overnight or without struggle.

Frederick Douglass, a leader of the anti-slavery movement in the US, said in a speech in 1857, 'If there is no struggle, there is no progress. ... The struggle may be a moral one or it may be a physical one, or it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will.'

So this Navratri, I'm going to tell my daughter about Saraswati's (in)famous temper and about speaking up with confidence. I'm going to celebrate the so-called difficult parts of myself, because not only do they complete me, but they also have the potential to change the world.

Image Source: Canva Pro

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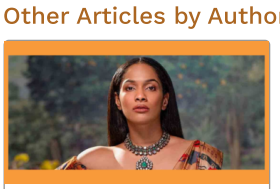
Nivedita Ramesh

I asked so many questions that I stopped getting answers. Then I started writing. **read more...**

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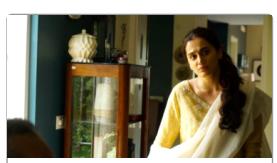
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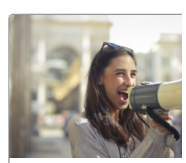
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Workplace Issues

October 12, 2023

Why The Economics Nobel Prize For Claudia Goldin Is So Significant For Women At Work Globally

The Nobel Prize to Claudia Goldin for her work on 'advancing our understanding of women's labour market outcomes' has put the gender inequity in the labour market in the spotlight.

Natasha Ramarathnam

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“There are still large differences between women and men in terms of what they do, how they’re remunerated and so on. And the question is, why is this the case? And that’s what the work is about.”
– **Claudia Goldin**

Claudia Goldin became the third woman, after **Elinor Ostrom** and **Esther Duflo** to win the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, and the first woman to be an individual winner. This takes the percentage of women awardees (in Economics) up from 2.17% to 3.23%, which is nearly a 50% increase.

But that is the not the only reason we should be celebrating the win of the 77 year old economic historian and labour economist from Harvard University. We should be celebrating because Claudia Goldin was awarded the Prize for “having advanced our understanding of women’s labour market outcomes’.

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Sex & Sexuality

October 15, 2023

Unveiling the Mysteries of Sex Education: A Throwback to High School Chronicles

Has our understanding of what to teach children in sex education changed from when it was all about abstinence and taboo?

Lekshmi Rita Venugopal

Oh, high school days!

A whirlwind of uniforms, friendships, and adolescent curiosity.

Let’s turn back the clock to reminisce about those quirky moments from our sexual education class.

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