



Women's Livelihoods Program

Navratri is one of my favorite times of the year. The towns around me are bursting with colors, the air is vibrating with energetic garba and dandiya beats, and my friends are dressed in the color that each day of Navratri represents. But Navratri is more than just colors and garba. It is the worship of the divine feminine represented by the goddesses Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati. We celebrate Durga's triumph over demons, Lakshmi's bestowal of wealth, and Saraswati's wisdom, yet there is a disconnect between the respect we offer the Devis worshipped during the nine days and the unfortunate reality that women face every day.

The irony of Navratri and women empowerment today is as sharp as Durga's sword. While we are worshipping the Goddesses, we are also conveniently overlooking the daily battles that today's goddesses face from wage gaps to gender-based violence, from being sidelined in decision-making to bearing the brunt of climate change. And while during the nine glorious days of Navratri women are the epitome of power, wisdom and prosperity, this ideology takes a back seat quickly after the festivities are over, proving that women's rights are more like suggestions and empowerment is a convenient festival theme.

Raah Foundation helps uplift the rural communities who are battling the demons of climate change, and I get to experience first hand the devastating effects of a changing environment on rural women. These women walk miles for water, struggle to grow crops, and bear the weight of caring for their families as the land they depend on withers. This makes me ponder if the celebration of Navratri I so dearly adore is a mere hypocrisy in the face of the challenges faced by a lot of women around India.

We invoke the goddess for strength, but don't work towards ensuring that the women facing these battles receive the resources and support they need. We venerate Saraswati's wisdom, but that does not translate to access to education for the millions of girls whose dreams are compromised by poverty and societal expectations. We worship Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, with prayers for wealth, yet many women today remain financially excluded, denied land ownership, and left out of economic opportunities.



Women in rural Maharashtra walking miles in scorching sun to fetch water



Rural woman helping plant saplings to support Raah Foundation's reforestation efforts



Textile waste upcycling as part of Women's Livelihoods Program

While the irony of celebrating women's power during Navratri can't be ignored, the festival also holds within it a ray of hope. Just as Goddess Durga fought demons, real women are fighting their own battles—and they're winning. Women are no longer content to be celebrated for nine days while being ignored for the rest of the year. Movements for gender equality are gaining ground, and more women are stepping into leadership roles, challenging the status quo, and driving change in their communities. Slowly but surely, women are breaking the barriers that have kept them from reaching their full potential. Raah Foundation is also contributing towards this change by helping women in rural Maharashtra become digitally literate and financially independent which gives these women freedom and control over their own lives.

This to me represents the boundless strength and potential that lives within each woman just like the Goddesses worshipped during Navratri. Women are proving, time and again, that they are the driving force behind social change, innovation, and resilience. Despite the odds being stacked against them, women are contributing towards building sustainable futures, nurturing families, and leading communities with grace and strength. And just like the goddesses of Navratri, they're doing it with wisdom, determination, and an unyielding belief in justice.

So, this year when you play garba and sing prayers, let it be more than a mere gesture towards women's strength and resilience. Let it be a reminder that the goddesses we worship during Navratri lives on in the women around us every day. And let this festival inspire real change by supporting organizations like Raah Foundation and turn our celebration into a lasting change by ensuring that women are not an afterthought but a fundamental necessity in creating an equitable future.

Women's progress is not the sole responsibility of women but rather a collective effort from the society towards creating safe spaces for women where they can thrive and conquer their dreams. This will bring us closer to a world where the strength we celebrate is no longer symbolic, but truly a reality. The festival of Navratri may end in nine days, but the journey of empowerment is just beginning.



Financial Literacy program with rural women.

~ Monica Rao