



Embodying the Divine: Political Women and the Recasting of Hindu Goddess Archetypes

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Abstract

In contemporary India, femininity is shaped by a confluence of religious iconography, cinematic tropes, and political narratives. Shyaonti Talwar's *the Devi in the Diva* offers a compelling framework for understanding how Hindu goddess archetypes Durga, Kali, Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Parvati are reimagined in Bollywood cinema as templates for idealised womanhood. These divine figures, while reinforcing traditional roles, also allow subtle space for subversion. Extending Talwar's framework into the political sphere reveals how similar archetypes are mapped onto women politicians, elevating their public image while simultaneously constraining their agency. Figures like Indira Gandhi, Mamata Banerjee, Mayawati, and Kalpana Soren embody Durga's warrior strength, often celebrated during national crises but scrutinised when assertiveness challenges patriarchal norms. Pragya Thakur and Sadhvi Rithambhara channel Kali's militant rage, invoking divine fury to legitimise resistance, yet risking reduction to spectacles of aggression. Leaders such as Sushma Swaraj and Nirmala Sitharaman reflect Lakshmi's grace. Parvati and Sita's archetypes frame figures like Droupadi Murmu, Pratibha Patil and Jayalalithaa as maternal and morally pure, often domesticating their political presence. While these divine metaphors empower symbolically, they also regulate demanding conformity to idealised femininity and erasing intersectional identities like caste and tribe. Drawing from feminist and postcolonial theory, the essay argues that goddess symbolism functions as both elevation and control. Ultimately, these archetypes are not static; they are contested and redefined by political women navigating complex cultural terrains.

Keywords: Femininity Religious Iconography Archetypes, Assertiveness Warrior Strength, Spectacles of Aggression, Cultural Terrains.

Introduction

In contemporary India, the symbolic terrain of femininity is shaped not only by religious iconography but also by cinematic and political narratives. Shyaonti Talwar's *the Devi in the*

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Diva offers a compelling framework for understanding how Hindu goddess archetypes Durga, Kali, Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Parvati are reimagined in Bollywood cinema. These divine figures, long embedded in cultural consciousness, serve as templates for idealised womanhood, often reinforcing traditional roles while subtly allowing space for subversion.

This article extends Talwar's framework into the political sphere, drawing parallels between mythologised cinematic heroines and real-life women politicians. It argues that political women are often cast in goddess-infused archetypes that elevate their public image while simultaneously constraining their agency. Through case studies of figures like Indira Gandhi, Mamata Banerjee, Sushma Swaraj, Droupadi Murmu, Kalpana Soren, and more, the article explores how divine femininity is domesticated in both media and politics.

Talwar's analysis reveals how Bollywood heroines are mapped onto goddess figures to evoke reverence, power, and moral clarity. Fierce female cops channel Durga's warrior energy; horror heroines embody Kali's rage; glamorous diplomats reflect Lakshmi's grace; intellectual artists mirror Saraswati's wisdom; and traditional wives evoke Parvati's devotion. This symbolic mapping is not confined to cinema. Women politicians, too, are cast in roles that mirror these divine archetypes.

1. Mapping the Divine onto the Political

The symbolic mapping of women politicians onto divine archetypes is not merely a cultural curiosity, it is a deeply embedded ideological practice that shapes public perception, media representation, and political legitimacy. Drawing from feminist cultural theory, semiotics, postcolonial critique, and political theology; this framework interrogates how mythic femininity is both performed and imposed within the political sphere.

Feminist theorists like Judith Butler argue that gender is performative, shaped by cultural scripts rather than innate identity (Butler 1990). In the Indian context, women politicians are often expected to embody goddess figures where Durga as the warrior, Lakshmi as the nurturer, Saraswati as the intellectual; reinforcing normative femininity and limiting political agency. Laura Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure, though rooted in cinema, extends to political media, where women are framed through mythic lenses that satisfy cultural expectations rather than reflect their strategic or ideological roles (Mulvey, 1975).

Through the lens of semiotics, Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* reveals how political women become 'signs' within a larger mythic system. Their public personas are coded with symbolic meanings of purity, sacrifice, strength, that are polysemic yet often interpreted through patriarchal comfort zones (Barthes, 1972). A Durga-like figure may be celebrated for strength or vilified for aggression, depending on the dominant narrative.

Postcolonial feminism, particularly Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique, highlights how the goddess metaphors erase intersectional identities of caste, tribe, and region by universalising womanhood through elite, upper-caste Hindu symbols (Mohanty, 2003). This symbolic mapping becomes a hegemonic tool, granting legitimacy only to those who conform to culturally sanctioned roles.

Finally, political theology underscores how divine archetypes sacralise authority, aligning women with mythic figures to legitimise their power. Yet this sacralisation also constrains dissent: a woman cast as Lakshmi may be penalised for assertiveness, while a Kali figure may be demonised for rage (Tawa Lama, 2001).

This framework reveals how symbolic mapping, while seemingly celebratory, often functions as a regulatory mechanism. It elevates women through divine metaphor while

simultaneously disciplining their political expression.

1.1. Durga: The Warrior and the Wound

Durga, the multi-armed goddess of war, was created to defeat the demon Mahishasura. She embodies righteous anger, strategic power, and maternal protection; a fusion of nurture and destruction. This archetype has been symbolically mapped onto political women who wield power assertively, especially during national crises.

Indira Gandhi's leadership during the 1971 India-Pakistan war exemplifies this archetype. Her strategic alliance with the Soviet Union, defiance of the US Seventh Fleet, and humanitarian response to 10 million refugees from East Pakistan positioned her as a protector of the vulnerable and a warrior against tyranny. Atal Bihari Vajpayee famously likened her to Durga, acknowledging her embodiment of divine feminine strength (Davar).

Yet, the Durga archetype is double-edged. During the Emergency (1975–77), Gandhi suspended civil liberties, censored the press, and imprisoned opposition leaders. Butler argues that gender is not innate but enacted through repeated behaviours shaped by societal norms. Gandhi's embodiment of Durga is both nurturing and militant which disrupts conventional expectations of femininity as passive or caregiving. Christ's work on goddess traditions emphasises the spiritual and political significance of female divinity. Durga, in her view, represents both creation and destruction; a holistic feminine power that transcends patriarchal binaries.

Vasundhara Raje is the embodiment of shakti in action. Her political career (breaking into a male-dominated space as Rajasthan's first woman Chief Minister) mirrors that combative, trailblazing energy. Her emphasis on women's empowerment, rural development, and infrastructure projects aligns with this guardian role. Raje's Scindia lineage and her ability to project authority in Rajasthan politics reinforce this aura of sovereignty. Durga's many arms symbolize multitasking and versatility. Raje's journey from Union Minister to state leader, balancing heritage, governance, and party politics, reflects that multiplicity.

Mamata Banerjee similarly invokes the Durga archetype. Her alignment with Durga Puja (Bengal's most prominent festival) reinforces her image as a cultural protector. She inaugurates pandals, composes puja songs, and paints Durga's eyes, symbolically positioning herself as Durga incarnate. Her confrontational stance against the BJP's linguistic profiling and voter roll revisions has been framed as protective rage, akin to Durga.

Proma Ray Chaudhury's theory of political asceticism helps decode Mamata's persona. Her refusal to marry, austere lifestyle, and populist rhetoric align with traditionalist discourses that qualify women for leadership within androcentric systems. Through Laclau and Mouffe's lens, Mamata's embodiment of Durga becomes a populist articulation of 'the people' against elite oppression. Yet, as Carol P. Christ notes, goddess symbolism can empower while simultaneously constraining. It expects moral purity and maternal sacrifice from women who wield power.

Mayawati, former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, embodies Durga's militant resolve. Her rise from Dalit activism to political prominence channels the goddess's combative energy. Yet, like Durga, she bears the wound of constant scrutiny. Her assertiveness often reframed as arrogance, her symbolic power as threat.

Kalpana Soren's political emergence in 2024, following her husband Hemant Soren's arrest, was marked by a rhetoric of resistance and protection. Her public stance against what she termed 'fascist forces' and her leadership during the Gandey by poll positioned her as a

protector of tribal dignity and democratic integrity. Much like Durga, who was created to defeat the demon Mahishasura, Kalpana stepped into the political arena during a moment of crisis, embodying strategic defiance and maternal resolve. Kalpana's Santali heritage, simple attire, and grassroots appeal reinforce her image as a Durga-like figure, wielding moral authority and cultural protection.

1.2. Kali: Rage, Resistance, and the Politics of Fury

Kali, the fierce goddess adorned with a garland of skulls, blood-soaked body, and protruding tongue, embodies ungovernable feminine power. She is invoked in moments of rupture when destruction becomes necessary for transformation, and rage becomes a tool of resistance. In political discourse, Kali has emerged as a potent symbol for women who channel militant defiance, especially within the Hindutva framework, where divine legitimacy is often used to justify political aggression.

Figures like Pragya Singh Thakur, an MP and self-proclaimed sadhvi, exemplify this archetype. Her rhetoric marked by unapologetic nationalism, draws on Kali's iconography to project strength, vengeance, and divine sanction. Similarly, Sadhvi Niranjana Jyoti, known for her provocative speeches, and Sadhvi Rithambara, a key figure in the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, have used religious symbolism to frame their political presence as righteous fury against perceived cultural threats.

These women are not cast as nurturing leaders or diplomatic negotiators. Instead, they are framed as avengers, reclaiming space through fury and spiritual warfare. Kali's image becomes both a shield and a sword that protect cultural identity while striking down ideological opponents. This symbolic power legitimises resistance, but it also risks glorifying violence and erasing complexity.

The Kali archetype is fraught. While it empowers women to defy patriarchal expectations and assert agency, it can also reduce them to spectacles of rage, stripped of nuance, empathy, and political depth. Their humanity is often obscured by the theatricality of divine wrath. As scholar Shohini Ghosh and others have noted, such mythic framing can elevate women symbolically while disciplining their actual political expression. Political women cast as Kali risk being reduced to spectacles of rage, stripped of nuance and empathy. Their power is celebrated, but their humanity is obscured.

1.3. Lakshmi and Saraswati: Diplomacy and Intellectual Grace

The Lakshmi archetype, associated with wealth, elegance, and strategic balance, finds resonance in leaders like Sushma Swaraj, Nirmala Sitharaman, and Meira Kumar. Sushma Swaraj, as External Affairs Minister, was known for her poised diplomacy and maternal outreach, often responding personally to citizens in distress abroad. Her public image radiated warmth and clarity, yet she wielded considerable influence in foreign policy. Nirmala Sitharaman, India's first full-time female Finance Minister, exemplifies economic stewardship with composed authority. Her speeches and budget presentations reflect strategic finesse and restraint, aligning with Lakshmi's dignified abundance. Meira Kumar, as the first woman Speaker of the Lok Sabha, brought procedural elegance and inclusivity to parliamentary proceedings, embodying prosperity with quiet strength especially significant given her Dalit identity.

In contrast, the Saraswati archetype that is goddess of knowledge, language, and cultural refinement manifests in leaders who shape discourse, education, and artistic engagement. Smriti Irani, as Minister of Education and Culture, bridges popular culture and policy-making, navigating complex terrains of curriculum reform and national identity. Her rhetorical agility

and cultural fluency reflect Saraswati's intellectual depth. Jothimani Sennimalai, a writer and Parliamentarian, channels poetic sensibility and grassroots activism into her advocacy for Dalit and rural communities. Her voice, both literary and legislative, exemplifies the power of language as a tool for justice.

Kalpana Soren, with her academic background in Electrical Engineering and Business Administration, and her multilingual fluency in Santali, Odia, Hindi, Bengali, and English, also aligns with the Saraswati archetype. Her leadership in social initiatives like the Sona Sobharam Memorial Society reflects a commitment to cultural stewardship and community empowerment. Her persona blends technical acumen with emotional intelligence, positioning her as a modern embodiment of wisdom and creativity.

Mahua Moitra, known for her articulate parliamentary interventions and fearless critique of authoritarianism, also fits within the Saraswati frame; though she stretches its boundaries. Her command of constitutional values and rhetorical precision reflect Saraswati's assertive wisdom, even as her confrontational style challenges the limits of respectability often imposed on women in public life.

1.4. Parvati/Sita: Devotion and Domestic Virtue

Parvati and Sita represent devotion, domesticity, and moral integrity. Political women like Droupadi Murmu and Pratibha Patil are often framed through this lens; maternal figures who embody virtue and restraint. Murmu's presidency, while historic, has been critiqued for its symbolic sanitisation. Her tribal identity is often obscured, and her image domesticated to fit the Bharat Mata mold.

Jayalalithaa, once a film star turned political matriarch, was revered as "Amma", a maternal figure akin to Parvati. Her supporters celebrated her with devotional fervour, even tattooing her image and staging mass rituals on her birthday. Yet this idealisation also masked authoritarian tendencies, showing how divine devotion can obscure democratic critique.

This erasure reflects a broader pattern. Just as Bollywood heroines are idealised through goddess imagery, political women are mythologised to evoke reverence but this can limit their agency. They are expected to be both fierce and nurturing, assertive yet morally pure. The diva's dilemma becomes the politician's paradox.

While the invocation of goddess archetypes in the representation of women politicians may appear to offer symbolic elevation, it simultaneously imposes a series of ideological constraints that regulate their public persona and political agency. This duality reflects a broader cultural logic wherein reverence becomes a mechanism of domestication.

Symbolism and Constraints: The Double Bind of Divine Representation

Firstly, the mythic elevation of political women casting them as embodiments of divine figures such as Durga, Lakshmi, or Kali. It serves to legitimise their authority through sacralised imagery. However, this reverence often domesticates their power, framing it within acceptable boundaries of femininity and moral virtue. The archetype of Durga, for instance, is celebrated for protective strength, yet any assertion of dominance risks transgressing the moral binaries imposed by patriarchal norms. Similarly, Kali's symbolic rage must be tempered into resistance rather than destruction, lest it be construed as destabilising or excessive.

Secondly, these archetypal roles are embedded within rigid moral binaries that demand a delicate balance between strength and submission. Women leaders are expected to embody assertiveness without violating the cultural expectations of grace, restraint, and maternal virtue.

Such framing not only limits the spectrum of acceptable political behaviour but also reinforces gendered expectations that constrain dissent and ideological radicalism.

Thirdly, the symbolic mapping often entails a strategic erasure of caste, class, and tribal identities. As seen in critiques surrounding the presidency of Droupadi Murmu, the deployment of goddess imagery can obscure the socio-political realities of marginalised communities, subsuming individual identity within a homogenised and upper-caste Hindu framework. This erasure perpetuates hegemonic narratives that universalise womanhood while silencing intersectional difference.

These constraints echo the observations of Shohini Ghosh and others in works such as *Devi in the Diva*, where cinematic heroines are empowered through goddess symbolism yet simultaneously confined by it. The same dynamic applies to political women, whose divine framing may inspire reverence but also function as a regulatory apparatus—elevating their symbolic status while delimiting their political expression.

2. Conclusion

The recasting of Hindu goddess archetypes in political life reveals a complex interplay between empowerment and control. Women leaders are elevated through mythic symbolism, but this elevation often comes with moral expectations, cultural erasure, and emotional regulation. The goddess becomes both a mirror and a mold, reflecting feminine strength while shaping its acceptable expression.

By drawing parallels between Bollywood divas and political women, Talwar's framework opens a rich field of inquiry. It invites us to examine how divine femininity is domesticated in public life used to inspire, but also to discipline. In postcolonial contexts, this lens can reshape feminist pedagogy, curriculum design, and media critique, offering new ways to understand power, performance, and symbolic identity.

Ultimately, the goddess archetypes are not static, they are contested, reimagined, and embodied in diverse ways. Political women do not merely inherit these symbols; they negotiate them, subvert them, and sometimes redefine them altogether.

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Bio-note

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