Faces of the Goddess: Representation, Identity, and Power in Indian Religious Iconography

By Deeksha, Independent Researcher and Writer at Sociology Group

In Telugu, when women wear ornaments and flowers, people say: “Mahalakshmi laga unav Amma” (you are looking like Goddess Lakshmi). This everyday expression suggests that goddess imagery in India often mirrors the women around them. Such resemblances raise questions: do goddesses take on the face of their communities? Or do they reflect dominant ideals of beauty, power, and morality? This paper explores how Indian goddesses are represented in different regions and what this reveals about identity, caste, and gender.

Dhari Devi: A Living Observation

During my visit to the Dhari Devi temple in Uttarakhand, I was struck by the resemblance between the idol and Garhwali women. The goddess’s cheeks, eyes, and traditional *naath* (nose ring) echoed local women’s features and ornaments. Locals believe that the idol transforms with time: appearing as a girl in the morning, a woman at noon, and an old lady at night, symbolizing life’s stages. The temple’s location in the middle of the Alaknanda river, and its Garhwali-style architecture, further reinforce regional identity.

When the idol was relocated in June 2013 for a hydroelectric project, Kedarnath was devastated by floods within hours. Villagers interpreted this as the goddess’s anger, a warning against disrupting sacred ecology. Ecofeminist thinkers like Vandana Shiva (1989) argue that such stories embody the deep link between women, environment, and the sacred, where rivers and mountains are imagined as female bodies. Dhari Devi thus illustrates how goddess worship intertwines local women’s identity, ecological protection, and resistance to modern projects.

Visual and Experiential Reflections

The resemblance between goddess and woman is not always physical. William Sax (1991), in his study of Nanda Devi in the Himalayas, shows that the goddess reflects women’s lived experiences. Ritual processions of the goddess across villages parallel the journeys of Garhwali women who leave their natal homes at marriage but continue to travel back to maintain ties. In this sense, the goddess embodies social roles, kinship bonds, and emotional journeys.

Other traditions highlight different aspects of womanhood. Shashthi in Bengal is worshipped as a fertility goddess, protecting children and mothers. In Tamil Nadu, Mariamman is associated with disease and healing, especially among Dalit communities. In Andhra Pradesh, Tapper (1979) observed that goddesses often represent women’s social statuses, mother, wife, or widow rather than their physical features. Widowhood, for instance, becomes both a symbol of loss and of spiritual power. These examples show that goddesses reflect not only women’s bodies but also their social positions.

Regional Faces of the Goddess

In Bengal, the image of Kali, with large expressive eyes, draped sari, and fierce demeanor, resonates with Bengali aesthetics and culture. Beyond appearance, Kali has carried political meaning. As Fabish (2007) notes, Aurobindo Ghosh invoked Kali as a revolutionary symbol during the nationalist movement, turning divine ferocity into anti-colonial resistance. Here, goddess imagery mirrored both Bengali women and Bengali politics.

In Tamil Nadu, Beck (2021) shows that the Kannimar goddesses mirror women's roles as sisters, mediators, and protectors. In Andhra Pradesh, Tapper (1979) similarly highlights how deities symbolize family roles and social expectations. In Maharashtra, Tulja Bhavani became Shivaji's war goddess and symbol of Maratha pride, demonstrating how goddess faces can embody political authority. In Kerala, the Bhagavathi is enacted in *Theyyam* performances where male performers embody the goddess, highlighting gender fluidity in divine representation.

North Indian examples show similar diversity. Sheetla Mata, worshipped as a plague goddess, is associated with lower-caste communities and disease protection. In Rajasthan, sati shrines and Hinglaj Mata embody ideals of chastity and sacrifice, reflecting local gender norms. Across regions, goddesses shift their "faces" to embody local women's identities, fears, and aspirations.

Caste, Power, and Representation

At first glance, goddess worship seems to honor women. But as Sengupta (2020) demonstrates in *Mutating Goddesses*, this honor exists within Brahmanical patriarchy. She traces how Manasā, Caṇḍī, Ṣaṣṭhī, and Lakṣmī were reshaped over centuries depending on caste and class power. While Sanskritized versions emphasized male-controlled ideals, folk practices such as *bratakathās* gave space to women and Dalits. Thus, goddess imagery is never neutral, it reflects social hierarchy.

Resistance to such appropriation is also evident. Pal (2025), in his study of Buri Devis in Asansol, shows how Scheduled Castes and Tribes worship "old-woman goddesses" despite Brahmanical pressures. These local deities represent a successful assertion of non-Brahmanical voices, highlighting coexistence and resistance. Similar patterns exist in Telangana, where Ellamma and Pochamma are worshipped with stone symbols rather than idols, reinforcing caste-based differences in divine representation. Mariamman of Tamil Nadu, strongly linked to Dalit women, further exemplifies how marginalized communities maintain their own goddess traditions against Sanskritization (Srinivas, 1952).

Theoretical Reflections

Sociological theory helps make sense of these observations. Durkheim (1912) argued that "the god of the clan is nothing but the clan itself" goddesses mirror the communities that create them. Clifford Geertz (1973) saw religion as a system of symbols that express a people's deepest values, which explains why goddesses embody local beauty standards, social roles, or political ideals.

Yet, as feminist scholars remind us, these images are filtered through structures of power. Uma Chakravarti (1993) highlights how caste and patriarchy work together in shaping gender roles. Spivak (1988) warns that subaltern women's voices are often erased even in religious representation. Sengupta

(2020) confirms this by showing how Brahmanical Sanskrit texts reshaped folk goddesses into controlled forms.

At the same time, ecofeminist thinkers like Vandana Shiva (1989) and Maria Mies (1993) emphasize how goddess traditions can resist exploitation, linking women's bodies and the earth as sacred. The Dhari Devi incident, where ecological disaster followed the goddess's displacement, fits directly into this framework.

Contemporary Faces of the Goddess

In modern India, goddess imagery continues to mutate. The figure of Bharat Mata, Mother India has been used by politicians to inspire nationalism, sometimes controversially. Television serials like *Devon ke Dev Mahadev* and *Siya ke Ram* reshape goddesses for mass audiences, often amplifying patriarchal or nationalist ideals. On social media, goddess memes circulate as cultural symbols, showing how divine faces remain contested even today.

Conclusion

Across India, goddess representation reveals a layered story. Sometimes goddesses mirror women's physical appearance, sometimes their roles as mothers, wives, or widows, and often they embody caste and class hierarchies. While Brahmanical traditions have historically shaped divine imagery, folk and Dalit communities resist by preserving their own deities. Theoretical insights from Durkheim, Geertz, Sengupta, and feminist scholars show that goddesses are never just divine, they are mirrors of identity, power, and community.

The question remains: when we look at the face of a goddess, whose face do we truly see, and whose is left unseen?

Ethical Consent and AI Use Statement

This study uses publicly available sources and limited personal observation, with no identifiable personal data collected. It is conducted with respect for cultural contexts and communities. AI tools were used only for language support; all analysis and interpretations are the author's original work.

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ABOUT AUTHOR:

My name is Deeksha, and I am a sociology graduate from Miranda House, University of Delhi. My research interests include religion, science and technology studies, urban sociology, and gender sociology. Since 2022, I have been working with SociologyGroup.com, where I have developed experience in qualitative research, including conducting interviews, literature reviews, and academic writing. My work focuses on understanding the relationship between social structures and everyday life.