Imagery of Goddesses: Devi-Mahatmya, Hindu Nationalism and Women's Oral Narratives from West Bengal, India

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I dedicate this research to my late father, Swapan Kr. Biswas.

I know you are proud of me. May your blessings always be with me.

ABSTRACT

The research focuses on the imagery of Hindu goddesses in the current socio-political scenario in India under Hindu nationalism. The Hindutva or Hindu nationalist framework believes in a monolithic Hindu identity that supports Brahmanical Hinduism and Brahmanical patriarchal models. Central to Hindutva politics are the bodies of Hindu women and Hindu goddesses. The goddess imagery in Hindutva is drawn from *Devi Mahatmya*, a 6th-century text dedicated to Hindu goddesses in India (Bacchetta, 1993), which is then refashioned to align with Hindutva's model of Hindu womanhood. Hindutva framework creates a dominant, North Indian, upper-caste, upper-class narrative of the Hindu goddess that erases the plurality in terms of gender, caste, class, ethnicity, and region. The Hindutva narrative also marginalises ordinary Hindu women's understanding of goddesses, which can challenge the homogenous lens of the Hindutva politics. There is a dearth of literature that explores this issue through an intersectional feminist framework that takes into consideration different social categories in the imagination of goddesses. The primary objective of my thesis is to examine goddess representations in Hindutva discourse, *Devi Mahatmya,* and oral stories of ordinary Hindu women to discover whether/to what extent various types of goddess imagery can reinforce stereotypical and patriarchal gender roles or empower women. The question that guided my analysis is: how do ordinary Hindu women's accounts of goddesses differ from the representation of goddesses in Hindu nationalist politics? My research shows the diversity in goddess imagery, both in the text *Devi Mahatmya* and in women's oral narratives of goddesses, which presents a counter-narrative to the Hindutva framework of goddesses. The findings point to the empowering, ambiguous, and regional variations in the divine feminine imagination, in contrast to the patriarchal, homogenous, and casteist portrayal of goddesses in Hindutva discourse.

Keywords: Gender and religion, goddesses, Hindu nationalism and Hindutva, intersectional feminism, feminist oral history

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INTRODUCTION

> *I will not say that nationalism is bad, but when we forcefully, you know, just overburdened ourself with nationalism, then happens what is happening right now. For me, South Asia is not like that. It's always open-ended territory, always semi-fluid polity, always lots of regions, lots of politics, lots of dynasties, lots of communities, languages, culture, customs, diversities are much, much more than unity. (Debolina Maitra, February 22, 2024)*[1]

> *That is the reason why we see, you know, the Akhand Bharat*[2]*, Hinduism umbrella term for the word, for the for the word Hindu, for there is no such thing as one single Hindu identity. (Madhabi Mondol, December, 22, 2023)*

> *She [Kali] is all-powerful, challenging the status quo. Okay, so who has her husband beneath her? If you look at the idol of Kali, she is standing with one foot on her husband's body. Right? And she is the epitome of anger. She is the epitome of violence, of cruelty. Kali is all about destruction. She destroys. But I would say Kali is not a destroyer in the negative sense of the term. She is a positive destroyer. So, she destroys whatever evil exists there. And, you know, without destruction, there is no creation possible. So, Kali is that image of destruction and that image, ironically, is not celebrated in general. (Shonali Roy, February 15, 2024)*

The political landscape in India under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government is marked by the integration of religion into mainstream politics, further dividing an already fragmented society along communal lines. Hindu nationalism has normalized communal politics, leading to cow vigilantism, lynching, and violence against minority communities, including women, lower-caste Dalits[3], and Indigenous peoples. Women are deeply affected, as their bodies become what Sikata Banerjee describes as "border guards" (Banerjee, 2010, p. 271), marking and defining religious identity and other social categories. The objective of Hindu nationalism is to create a Hindu-majority state, where

[1] Names of all participants have been replaced with a pseudonym to maintain anonymity as per the research ethics guidelines.

[2] Literal meaning of a unified or undivided Indian territory. This is an idea that the BJP and Hindu nationalist organizations promote as they speak of creating a Hindu nation.

[3] Dalits are considered a scheduled caste in India and occupy a lower rank in the Hindu caste system, which is a form of social stratification.

one religious identity dominates all others, impacting women's bodies shaped by intersecting identities of religion, caste, class, region, and ethnicity. Hindu women from upper castes and classes are also affected, as the BJP and its allied Hindutva organizations impose rigid models of Brahmanical patriarchy[4] and Hindu womanhood. These models define the roles of women, using religious icons like Durga, Kali, Sita, Ram, both male and female figures, to reinforce the expectations placed on Hindu women as guardians of the Hindu nation's honor.

OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH

The research is situated within the intersection of gender and religion and its relation to the current socio-political scenario in India under Hindu nationalism. Hindu nationalists (or Hindutva) believe in a Hindu supremacist rule. The objective of the Hindu nationalist project is to create a Hindu majority state. In the process of creating a Hindu majority state, the bodies of women are transformed into a site of contestation where, through the stereotypical and gendered imagery of goddesses, the Hindutva project reinforces the Brahmanical patriarchal model of gender norms. The concept of the Hindu woman is also problematized under Hindu nationalism, which includes mostly upper caste, elite women, and not lower caste, Indigenous women (Ganguly, 2024[5]). Hindu nationalist discourse creates a dominant[6], upper-caste, upper-class, North Indian narrative of goddesses[7](Ganguly, 2024) The

[4] Brahmanical patriarchy is the nature of patriarchy in Indian society. It is deeply tied to the caste system, where the Brahmins, or the upper caste, are in a superior position in terms of the caste system. Brahmanical patriarchy relies on controlling women's sexuality to maintain caste purity, along with ideas of honor, modesty, and control of women's bodies. See, Chakravarti, U. (1993). Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *28*(14), 579–585. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4399556 for more information.

[5] Cited from a news article. See Ganguly, S. (2024, July 27). Durga, Sita, Bharat Mata: The Goddess in Hindutva Politics and What it Means for Ordinary Women. *The Wire*. https://thewire.in/politics/durga-sita-bharat-mata-hindutva-goddess-women.

[6] By 'dominant,' I refer to the North Indian, upper-caste portrayal of Hindu goddesses that reinforces Brahminical Hinduism. I call it dominant because it is the most prevalent understanding of goddesses in India within the framework of Hindu nationalism.

[7] Hindutva politics endorse Brahmanical Hinduism, which relies on the Sanskrit scriptures, the Vedas, as the foundational pillar of Hinduism and supports the authority of Brahmin priests as the knowledge bearers of the Hindu Sanskrit scriptures (Fowler, 2012, pp.156-157). See Fowler, D. (2012). Brahmanical hinduism. In M. Juergensmeyer & W. C. Roof (Eds.)

goddess imagery is drawn from *Devi Mahatmya*, a 6th-century text dedicated to glorifying goddesses (Bacchetta, 1993, p. 40; Bacchetta, 2002, p. 164), which is then reshaped by those in power (mostly men) to align with their models of Hindu womanhood. The representations overlook the plurality of goddesses that vary by gender, caste, class, region, and ethnicity. There is a dearth of literature that explores this issue through an intersectional feminist framework that takes into consideration different social categories in the imagination of goddesses. What is also missing is the ordinary Hindu women's perspective of goddesses that can challenge Hindutva representations.

The primary objective of the research is to examine goddess imagery in Hindutva representations, *Devi Mahatmya,* and oral accounts of ordinary Hindu women to discover how goddess imagery can reinforce stereotypical and patriarchal gender roles or empower women. The following question guided my research: How do ordinary Hindu women's oral accounts of goddesses differ from the representation of goddesses in Hindu nationalist politics? By exploring this, my research highlights the diversity of goddess imagery, as seen in the text *Devi Mahatmya* and in the oral narratives of ordinary Hindu women, which counters Hindutva's uniform and exclusionary depiction of Hindu goddesses. My research also shows the empowering, ambiguous, complex, and regional variations in the divine feminine imagination, which resists and challenges the Brahmanical patriarchal and casteist depiction of goddesses in Hindutva discourse. I use an intersectional feminist framework and feminist oral history methodology to uncover the diverse and plural goddess traditions in texts and oral accounts, as well as critically exploring Hindutva organizations and their portrayal of goddesses.

Encyclopedia of global religion (Vol. 2, pp. 156-157). SAGE Publications, Inc., https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412997898.n99 for more information.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Hindu nationalist politics emerged in the late nineteenth century, evoking varied imagery of goddesses to attract women to join their organizations and delineate women's position within Hindu nationalism. The repository of goddesses used by Hindu nationalists includes all mainstream Hindu goddesses like Durga, Kali, Parvati[8], and Sita[9]. Other than that, Hindu nationalist discourse evoked memories of female historical figures like Ahilyabai[10], Jijabai[11], and Rani Lakshmibai[12], symbolizing ideal Hindu womanhood and motherhood. It is essential to note two key points here. First, all of these figures are Hindus, and they represent the militant role that women play in Hindu nationalist politics. Second, while these warrior women and goddesses are celebrated, the significance of benevolent and docile Hindu female figures like Sita and Parvati has never diminished and remains central to Hindutva ideology.

In Hindu nationalism, images of mother goddesses like Durga and Bharat Mata allow women to assume the roles of "avenging angels" (Sethi, 2002, p. 1551). However, when the crisis ends, women are expected to return to their designated roles as caring mothers and wives (Sethi, 2002, p. 1551). The aggressive, militant role prescribed for women in Hindu nationalist discourse is limited to violent protests that further the political goals of the Hindutva project. The militant role is not encouraged within the family structure or in the day-to-day lives of women, as it would undermine Brahmanical patriarchal models, traditional gender roles, and the family structure. Goddesses and historical female

[8] Siva's wife. Siva is one of the powerful male Hindu gods.

[9] Sita is a key figure in the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. She is celebrated for her devotion to her husband, Ram.

[10] Ahilyabai Holkar is the ruler of the Maratha Empire. See Raikar, S. P. (2025, August 28). *Ahilyabai Holkar.* Britannica.com. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ahilaybai-Holkar for more information.

[11] Jijabai is the mother of Chatrapati Shivaji, ruler of the Maratha Empire in 17th century. See Menon, K. D. (2005). "We Will Become Jijabai": Historical Tales of Hindu Nationalist Women in India. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *64*(1), 103–126. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25075678 for more information.

[12] Rani Lakshmibai is the queen of Jhansi and is known for her revolt against British rule.

figures are invoked as empowering role models for women cadres in Hindu nationalist organizations. However, this empowerment is tied to the actions and duties women perform within the framework of Hindu nationalism and does not extend to broader issues of women's liberation, equal rights, or challenging gender-based discriminatory practices and systemic barriers that marginalize women's voices in society. Even the roles that women perform within Hindutva politics are well-defined and restrictive.

The roles and duties assigned to women are carefully defined to avoid challenging male power and authority within the Hindutva organizations and outside. Women's empowering, aggressive, militant role is justified only as long as it serves Hindutva's cause. To maintain balance and avoid challenging patriarchy, Hindutva women organizations like Rashtra Sevika Samiti and Durga Vahini have consistently emphasized the roles of women as mothers, wives, and upholders of honor over the more violent and powerful models of womanhood. Syed Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi (2013) notes,

> Gender has emerged in Hindu nationalism as a politicised entity whereby Hindu women are depicted as the repositories of religious beliefs and the keepers of purity and integrity of the Hindu community. (Soherwordi, 2013, p. 1)

The participation of women in Hindutva politics is about maintaining the classical stereotypes (Soherwordi, 2013, p. 7) of Hindu womanhood and motherhood that Hindu nationalism glorifies. The ideals of perfect mothers and loyal wives are significant and form the foundation of women's expected roles within Hindutva politics. However, it is important to recognize that women have successfully carved out their own space in Hindu nationalist politics through everyday negotiations with ideas of masculinity and femininity shaped by Hindutva discourse (Banerjee, 2003, p. 168). Their negotiations also reveal a story of women's sense of independence in creating a way of life beyond family through political activism.

Religion occupies a central position in Hindutva politics. Paola Bacchetta rightly points out that Hindu Nationalism is a "micro-religious nationalism of elites" (Bacchetta, 2002, p. 259) by which the author implies that the Hindu nationalist discourse is in opposition to the "secular, pluralist" (Bacchetta, 2002, p. 259) nature of nationalism in India and manipulate the religious symbols and icons for its own political goals (Bacchetta, 2002). Although Hindu nationalists' glorification of warrior goddesses and their fiery image creates a significant space for women's participation in Hindu nationalist politics, the goddess portrayal does not convey feminists' ideas of women's empowerment and liberation that they advocate for women.

Hindu nationalist discourse claims to present an empowering imagery of goddesses and equates women to goddesses. However, the problem remains with what this empowerment means for women's rights, power, freedom, and equality. There are varied models for women to enter Hindu nationalist politics, such as warrior or militant roles, celibate roles, or more traditional roles of mothers and wives. Sikata Banerjee uses the term "feminist nationalisms" (Banerjee, 2006, p. 63) when discussing women's involvement in Hindu nationalism, implying that the models available for women to enter Hindutva politics do not align with feminist nationalisms that advocate for equality, protest against violence toward women, and redefine power dynamics within patriarchal institutions like family and society at large (Banerjee, 2006).

MAPPING THE KEY CHAPTERS AND ARGUMENTS

In the chapters that follow, I outline the theoretical, conceptual, and methodological approach to the research question I pose. I then include a discussion of the remaining chapters in the thesis. The chapters are as follows:

In **Chapter 1**, “Theoretical Framework and Literature Review,” I discuss goddess imagery. The chapter begins by outlining the core theoretical frameworks guiding this research. The chapter discusses at length the concept of intersectionality and how this framework has been used to address the objective of my study and to explore issues of empowerment, caste, gender, and class in the depiction of goddesses. I also analyze the use of intersectionality in the context of the Global South to examine the nuanced ideas of resistance and empowerment present in women's oral accounts of goddesses. In this chapter, I discuss the feminist concept of women’s empowerment, which is a crucial component of my analysis, as my research focuses on empowerment in goddess imagery within dominant narratives of Hindutva politics, in the text *Devi Mahatmya*, and in the perceptions of ordinary Hindu women. I clarify what I mean by ‘imagery’ of the goddess and how it is examined in the study. Then, I elaborate on the meaning of plurality in goddess imagery. The chapter introduces the key concepts used, including Humes’ (2000) work on *Devi Mahatmya*, which is instrumental in analyzing goddess representations in my research. It also provides a comprehensive literature review, examining existing scholarship and literature on goddess imagery and Hindutva discourse. The review highlights key themes, the current body of research on Hindu nationalism, Hindu goddesses, *Devi Mahatmya*, and women's roles in Hindutva politics.

In “Methodology and Methods,” **Chapter 2**, I explain the research methodology and techniques I employ to achieve my research objective. It starts by explaining the practice of oral history and feminist oral history methodology, then details the methods, including interviews, locations, data analysis, sources, fieldwork observations, and sample characteristics. It covers technical aspects like zoom interviews used for data collection and the methods applied in data analysis. The chapter also discusses in depth the use of feminist oral history in the context of the Global South, addressing issues of positionality and limitations in my research.

Understanding Hindu nationalist representations of goddesses is central to my analysis of whether these portrayals empower women or reinforce patriarchal gender norms. In **Chapter 3**, I explore the imagery of goddesses in Hindutva discourse. The chapter has three main sections. The first provides an overview of Hindu nationalism, its ideology, and politics, drawing parallels to the Nazi policy of marginalization and racial supremacy. It discusses Hindutva organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), which form the institutional foundation of the Hindutva project. The chapter explains how these organizations and their subdivisions operate, along with their objectives and political ambitions. It describes the appropriation of religious and historical figures like Ram[13] and Shivaji[14] as models of Hindu masculinity by right-wing organizations led by men, such as the VHP and RSS. In the second section, the chapter highlights the role of women in Hindu nationalism, the development of Hindu right-wing women's groups, and the invocation of goddesses and historical figures by women's Hindutva organizations to justify women's militant participation in Hindu nationalist politics. It examines Rashtra Sevika Samiti (the Samiti) and Durga Vahini in detail, as they are the primary organizations led by Hindu right-wing women. The final section explores goddess imagery of Durga, Kali, and Ashtabhuja, along with female historical and mythological figures that Hindutva groups co-opt. The chapter argues that by co-opting goddesses, Hindutva women leaders craft their own version of feminism. In this form, they promote ideas of empowerment to legitimize violent, militant roles played by Hindutva women cadres, rather than challenging patriarchal structures and traditional gender roles.

In **Chapter 4**, I examine the goddess representations in the 6th-century text, *Devi Mahatmya*, which glorifies the goddess as the supreme deity. The main goal is to analyze how goddesses are portrayed in the text to emphasize the plurality, diversity, and complexity of goddess imagery, as well

[13] Ram is the central figure of the Hindu epic, *Ramayana*.

[14] The ruler of the Maratha empire, India.

as how these representations empower women compared to stereotypical and homogenous Hindutva narratives of goddesses. The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first briefly discusses the goddess tradition in India, tracing the development of goddesses in Hindu religious practice. The second section provides an overview of the text and its historical and religious importance as part of the *Markandeya Purana*. It highlights the significance of the *Devi Mahatmya*, including its origins and composition, and offers a detailed discussion of the stories involving the goddesses. The third section focuses on analysis, framing the chapter's main argument around themes related to goddess imagery in the text, such as ambiguous representations, warrior depictions, the discussion of Matrikas or Mothers, and ultimately, the empowering aspects of the text's portrayal of goddesses.

I discuss the everyday presence of goddesses in ordinary Hindu women's lives in **Chapter 5**, and explore women's socialization with goddesses through family traditions, stories, region, and festivals surrounding goddesses in West Bengal[15]. There are two major sections in the chapter. The first section focuses on family traditions and stories passed down by generations, from grandmothers and parents to women. It examines the diverse ways goddesses are worshipped in Bengali households, the rituals that families follow, and the traditions they pass on to the next generation of women. In doing so, the chapter demonstrates how goddesses are perceived as friends, daughters, mothers, and intimate family figures, no longer distant deities. The chapter shows the presence of regional goddesses, such as Rajrajeswari and Manasa, who are worshipped alongside notable figures like Kali and Durga, thereby carrying the lineage of the family's goddess worship culture. The second section explores women's personal choices in worship, where they decide who and how they want to worship, follow, or emulate goddesses. What emerges is the diverse ways women interact with the divine feminine in their everyday lives. They redefine worship and invent informal rituals through which they communicate with goddesses, conveying lived religious practices (Ammerman, 2021). These

[15] I have used Bengal and West Bengal interchangeably in the thesis.

practices, which women perform in their everyday lives, challenge Brahminical rituals and patriarchal concepts of purity, impurity, and sexual chastity associated with women's bodies.

In the final analysis chapter, **Chapter 6,** I explore various forms that emerge from women's oral narratives of goddesses, which are divided into themes such as ambiguous imagery, Hindu womanhood, empowerment, plural, inclusive, and regional variations of goddess representations. The themes emerge from women's experiences and perceptions of goddesses. It concludes with remarks that summarize the analysis of goddess narratives in women's oral accounts. The chapter marks a shift from understanding goddess representations solely through textual or written sources to emphasizing women's lived experiences, which are often marginalized and sidelined in the mainstream interpretation of goddesses, as we see under Hindu nationalism. The chapter explicitly talks about the regional, empowering, and plural imagery of goddesses that directly challenge Hindutva's portrayals of goddesses and highlight the complexity in understanding the divine feminine rooted in the lived experiences of ordinary Hindu women. The regional and local versions of goddesses, still prominent and important figures in Bengal, oppose Hindutva's hegemonic and homogenous lens of understanding the divine feminine, which is tied to the Brahminical portrayal of Hindu goddesses that silences the multiple versions of goddesses that differ based on caste, class, region, and ethnicity. The analysis points to an intersectional understanding of the divine feminine, one that can only be found in the voices of ordinary Hindu women.

In **Chapter 7**, I tie together the main analysis in the chapters and explore the thematic unity among them, which is the representation of Hindu goddesses. The concluding remarks address the main research question and summarize the key findings. As a closing chapter, it also highlights contribution of the thesis to the scholarship on Hindu goddesses. Additionally, I discuss the limitations of my research.

CHAPTER ONE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

My research explores the representations of the goddesses in Hindutva discourse, *Devi Mahatmya,* and in women's lived experiences through an intersectional feminist framework. The goddess imagery under the Hindutva discourse is a linear portrayal of the divine feminine that erases the intersectional understanding of the goddesses that vary based on caste, class, ethnicity, and gender. It also marginalises the ordinary women's perspective of goddesses that stand against the monolithic imagination of the divine feminine by the Hindutva organizations.

However, an intersectional feminist analysis of goddess imagery reveals the complex and paradoxical nature of the goddesses, rooted in the lived experiences and regional understanding of the goddesses as found in the text, *Devi Mahatmya*, and in women's lived experiences. Intersectional feminist analysis offers a lens to analyze the intersecting social categories present in the understanding of the divine feminine, including the power dynamics, gendered, and casteist aspects embedded in Hindutva's framework of goddesses. As an analytics tool, intersectionality not only presents an inclusive understanding of the divine feminine but also points to the ideas of empowerment, plurality, and lived and embodied religious practices (Ammerman, 2021), evident in Hindu women's everyday interactions with the goddesses.

Instead of analyzing gender, religion, caste, class, and ethnicity as separate variables, the intersectional framework views these social identities as interconnected systems that shape our understanding of goddesses, both in scripture and in the lived experiences of women. Drawing on scholarly literature on intersectionality, my research employs intersectionality as a structural framework that guides both the theoretical analysis and methodological choices.

The intersectional lens in my study connects the core components of the analysis, which are the feminist analysis of goddess representations in *Devi Mahatmya*, Hindutva's goddess imagery, and Hindu women's understanding of the divine feminine, capturing their resistance and negotiation through their lived experiences of Hindu goddesses. Intersectionality in my research functions as a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between symbolic, textual representations and the lived experiences of Hindu women with goddesses within broader systems of power and exclusion.

In Section 1 of the chapter, I address the key theoretical concept used in analyzing symbolic, textual, and oral narratives of Hindu goddess imagery. I discuss feminist intersectional theory and how it helps to analyze the goddess imagery, along with the resistance, diversity, and empowerment present in the scriptures and oral accounts of goddesses. The second section examines the existing scholarship relevant to my research. I review the extensive body of literature on goddess imagery, divided into five subsections that focus on scholarship related to Hindutva ideology and politics, women's roles in Hindu nationalism, goddess traditions throughout India, and key writings on *Devi Mahatmya.*

SECTION 1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

INTERSECTIONALITY

For my research, I have used intersectionality as a lens for understanding how various aspects of gender, religion, caste, class, and ethnicity intersect in shaping the goddesses' representations in Hindutva politics, textual sources such as *Devi Mahamtya*, and Hindu women's lived experiences of goddesses. The concept of intersectionality was developed by Black feminists. Kimberley Crenshaw broadened the concept of intersectionality by showing how intersecting identities affect women of color (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw developed the concept of structural intersectionality, which focuses on how being a woman of color creates fundamentally different experiences with issues like rape and

domestic abuse compared to the experiences of a white woman (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1244-1245). In political intersectionality, Crenshaw focuses on feminist politics and antiracist politics, arguing that such politics often overlook the experiences of violence by women of color (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1244-1245). In her concept of representational intersectionality, Crenshaw points to the cultural representation of women of color and argues that how they are portrayed in popular culture can result in "intersectional disempowerment" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). Jennifer Cooke and Line Nyhagen (2025) trace the concept of intersectionality in the scholarly writings of Black feminists, activists, and women of color who contributed significantly to its development. Cooke and Nyhagen (2025) note that although the term is 'coined' (Cooke & Nyhagen, 2025, p. 4) by Crenshaw, the historical development of intersectionality includes the contributions from marginalized women across the globe, who focused on the lived experiences of Black women and other women of color, urging the need to employ an intersectional lens in feminism to include the voices from the periphery (Cooke & Nyhagen, 2025, pp. 4-6). The women of color addressed how Black women's voices are silenced in White feminist thought and activism, which overlooks how patriarchy, colonialism, and imperialism influence women of color's experiences (Cooke & Nyhagen, 2025, p.6). The framework of intersectionality highlights the standpoint of the marginalized and offers a qualitatively different lens for understanding how power operates through an interlocking system, marginalizing certain groups of women based on multiple social identities (Crenshaw, 1991).

I followed Ange-Marie Hancock's (2007) idea of intersectionality as a "research paradigm" (Hancock, 2007, p. 249), Cho et al.'s (2013) multiple uses of the intersectionality framework, Beatrice Halsaa and Line Nyhagen's (2016) use of intersectionality in analyzing women's religious identity and practices, Heidi Safia Mirza's concept of "embodied intersectionality" (Mirza & Nyhagen, 2025, p. 20; Mirza, 2013, p. 6) in understanding resistance and Seyidoglu et al.'s (2022) use of intersectionality as a framework in doing feminist research (Seyidoglu et al., 2022, p. 649). Seyidoglu et al. (2022) employ an intersectional lens to analyze the differences in the representation of racialized athletes in

North American magazines and compare them with the representation of non-racialized athletes. Using an intersectional lens to analyze the imagery of athletes enabled the authors to examine how race and sex influence representation. This approach helped to identify the tropes that portray Black women as 'animalistic' (Seyidoglu et al., 2022, p. 649). Ange-Marie Hancock (2007) moves away from understanding intersectionality as a "content specialization"[16] (Hancock, 2007, p. 249) and argues that intersectionality can be used as a "normative and empirical research paradigm" (Hancock, 2007, p. 249). Hancock's statement does not deny or overlook that intersectionality plays a crucial role in identifying oppression stemming from the intersecting categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on. Hancock emphasizes that intersectionality can do more and can also identify issues of "distributive justice, power" (Hancock, 2007, p. 249), bringing in other factors in the analysis. In my research, Hancock's outlook helps attend to empowerment, patriarchy, caste, class, and gender embedded in goddesses' representations. It addresses the issue of marginalization of voices in goddess representations under Hindutva discourse.

In line with Hancock's idea of the evolving nature of intersectionality and exploring the potential of the intersectional framework, Cho et al. (2013) bring to attention the multiple ways the intersectional framework can be utilized. Cho et al. speak about the "dynamics of intersectionality" (Cho et al., 2013, p. 807) by which the authors meant to show how researchers are using intersectionality to address issues of social justice and to explore intersectionality not only as an academic study but as a practical lens in analyzing issues of inequalities in the world (Cho et al., 2013).

[16] By content-based specialization, Hancock meant that intersectionality as a research paradigm has been used to highlight "the subjectivity of women" (Hancock, 2007, p. 248) who face marginalization based on the varied intersection of class, race, gender, and sexuality. The framework has been primarily used in women's studies research to include the silenced voices of marginalized people. Hancock believes that the intersectional feminist framework can be used as something more than a model for inclusion of marginalized voices. See Hancock, A. M. (2007). Intersectionality as a Normative and Empirical Paradigm. *Politics & Gender*, *3*(2), 248–254, doi:10.1017/S1743923X07000062 for more information.

Such an approach, as the scholars argue, leads to the formation of intersectionality as a field of study that addresses the critical and complex issues in the contemporary social context (Cho et al., 2013).

In my study, the intersectional framework is employed to highlight the intersecting identities of caste, class, gender, and ethnicity in the imagination of goddesses, while also pointing out the issues of marginalization, power, and Brahmanical patriarchal models associated with the representations under Hindutva ideology. Cho et al. (2013) argue that an analysis is intersectional not by simply using the word intersectionality or citing the authors. However, the focus should be on an "intersectional way of thinking" (Cho et al., 2013, p. 795) by which the authors meant examining how different aspects of race, gender, and caste combine to create experiences of "sameness and difference and its relation to power" (Cho et al., 2013, p. 795). I apply this in analyzing the Hindu Right's[17] symbolic representations of goddesses as "powerful ideological tools" (Seyidoglu et al., 2022, p. 643) as they act as role models for women, conveying values, virtues, and Brahmanical patriarchal gender roles through their imagery. The goddess imagery under Hindutva politics reinforces gender norms and upholds a Brahmanical, upper-caste representation of mainstream religious Hindu figures as symbols of the Hindu nation. This portrayal alienates the non-upper-caste understanding of goddesses, which encompasses a more regional and geography-specific perception or imagination. Seyidoglu et al. note that intersectionality captures how different social identities interact to influence the understanding of privilege and marginalization (Seyidoglu et al., 2022, p. 648). In my study, intersectionality helps in understanding the aspects of marginalization, inequality, and Brahmanical patriarchy in Hindutva's dominant representations of goddesses. It also helps to address the question of empowerment in *Devi Mahatmya* and Hindu women's oral narratives of goddesses.

An intersectional approach supports feminist oral history, which I use as my research methodology, as both pay attention to subjectivity, making it valuable for capturing narratives of

[17] Hindu Right is another name for Hindutva organizations.

resistance, empowerment, and negotiation in women's imagination of goddesses. In the Indian context, understanding the systematic barriers faced by women from minority groups, in different social settings, or by Indigenous women as a doubly burdened group will not help recognize that their situation and experiences differ from those of women living in an urban, elite, upper-class, upper-caste family. Moreover, the caste factor is more complex than the question of race (Ashoka University, 2016). Prof. Mary John (2016) notes in an interview that in India, there are other backward classes (OBCs), scheduled tribes, and scheduled castes, and they are in constant tension with each other. Each social category requires a different lens to see how it affects women's condition in society (Ashoka University, 2016). Categories such as class, religion, and ethnicity in India differ from the Global North context. Religion is not only a matter of faith in India, but is gradually seen as an identity. The word 'gradually' points to the increasing importance of religion under Hindu nationalism, where religion is tied to citizenship, patriotism, and nationalism. Women are also marked by caste, religious community, class, and ethnicity (Ashoka University, 2016)[18]. When analyzing the representations of the goddess and women's narratives about goddesses, all the above categories play a role.

Intersectionality provides that framework for examining women's experiences at the intersection of multiple social identities. While multiple scholars have employed intersectionality in analyzing the intersecting identities of caste, gender, class, and ethnicity, the framework has not been utilized as extensively in analyzing how religious identity and practices intersect with caste, gender, class, region, and ethnicity. However, Halsaa and Nyhagen (2016) use an intersectional framework to examine how religious identity intersects with various social categories to influence women's experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Halsaa and Nyhagen's (2016) theorizations on the intersectional framework are important to my research because I explore Hindu women's interactions

[18] This is taken from a lecture on intersectionality by Professor Mary John on YouTube, posted by Ashoka University, India. See Ashoka University. (2016, May 27). *Dr. Mary John on Intersectionality, Caste and the Postcolonial* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VWhKjM9SgXw for more information.

with goddesses and the ritual practices related to them, which are shaped by the intersecting social identities these women embody. Halsaa and Nyhagen (2016) employ an intersectional lens to examine whether religious practices pose "barriers or resources" (Halsaa & Nyhagen, 2016, p. 116) in "women's citizenship practices" (Halsaa & Nyhagen, 2016, p.116) as they are intertwined with the multifaceted identities of the groups, communities, and families to which women belong, as well as geographical and historical contexts (Halsaa & Nyhagen, 2016). Religious belief and citizenship are closely related (Halsaa & Nyhagen, 2016, p.114). Faith and practices can both offer resources for being a "good citizen" (Halsaa & Nyhagen, 2016, p. 114) and can also prevent women's participation in citizenship, as Halsaa and Nyhagen note, citing the example of lesbian female priests who do not get a job in the Lutheran Church (Halsaa & Nyhagen, 2016, p. 114).

Halsaa and Nyhagen's analysis of women's relationships with religion, religious identity, and practices through an intersectional lens calls for an inclusive and dynamic feminist lens that does not assume a fixed relationship between religion and patriarchy (Halsaa & Nyhagen, 2016, p. 151). Halsaa and Nyhagen (2016) note that for many religious women, their faith is central to their understanding of self and not their gender, unlike what most feminists believe. This brings a nuanced understanding of women's relationship with religious identity and faith-based practices that are affected by their "collective identities" (Halsaa & Nyhagen, 2016, p. 151) in terms of groups, religious communities, and region (Halsaa & Nyhagen, 2016, p.151). Applying their insights helps my research attend to the lived experiences of Hindu women and the ambivalent ways in which Hindu women engage with goddess imagery, where they see goddesses as symbols of power and also as resources for everyday negotiation and resistance across diverse social locations.

Intersectionality also helps in capturing the nuanced idea of resistance embedded in the lived experiences of women from the Global South. Mirza[19] discusses "embodied intersectionality" (Mirza & Nyhagen, 2025, p. 21; Mirza, 2013, p. 6), where the focus is on the body as a central component of analysis. Mirza studies the resistance and agency of Muslim women living in Britain. She defines embodied intersectionality as a concept that moves beyond listing the social identities of race, class, and gender and focuses on how various aspects of a Muslim woman's identity intersect and are experienced through the body (Mirza & Nyhagen, 2025, p. 23; Mirza, 2013, p. 6). Embodied intersectionality is not only useful in capturing discrimination and oppression faced based on race, gender, and other social identities but also in understanding how resistance and agency work in Muslim women's lived experiences as racialized, marginalized women (Mirza & Nyhagen, 2025, p.23). In embodied intersectionality, the focus is on the "embodied reality" (Mirza & Nyhagen, 2025, p. 24) of marginalized voices. Mirza, through an embodied intersectional lens, discusses how Muslim women perceive the *hijab* or veil not always as a symbol of oppression, but as a symbol of religious faith, identity, and strength, expressing their agency in choosing to wear the *hijab* (Mirza & Nyhagen, 2025, pp. 23-25). Mirza's nuanced understanding of Muslim women's engagement with *hijab* challenges Western ideas of oppression linked to the veil and highlights how resistance also appears in affirming one's cultural and religious identity (Mirza & Nyhagen, 2025, pp. 23-25).

In my study, embodied intersectionality (Mirza & Nyhagen, 2025) helps capture the resistance of women against the stereotypical representations of goddesses under Hindu nationalism, moving beyond the Western notion of resistance that involves extreme acts of revolution or rebellion (Zia, 2016). In the Indian context, resistance is often expressed through everyday negotiations, persistence,

[19] The term "embodied intersectionality' is formulated by Heidi Safia Mirza (Mirza & Nyhagen, 2025, pp. 21-22). See Mirza, S. H., & Nyhagen, L. (2025). Living and researching embodied intersectionality: Heidi Safia Mirza in conversation with Line Nyhagen. In J. Cooke & L. Nyhagen (Eds.), *Intersectional feminist research methodologies: Applications in the social sciences and humanities* (pp. 13–28). Routledge, Taylor & Francis. DOI: 10.4324/9781003399575-2 for more information.

subversion, and revolt against certain norms, rituals, and social structures. Resistance is also present in women's existence beyond endurance (Ganguly, 2024). Resistance is present in solidarity and in the determination to live in the face of marginalization. Women in the Global South do not have the advantage or resources to perform extreme rebellion in many situations, as they are affected by issues of caste, class, social pressure, absence of economic support, marriage, and religion. They resist and exist by negotiating with patriarchal norms in their everyday lives, and sometimes succumb to societal pressure in order to survive. In the Global South, silence is not the absence of language or voice, but a tool for expressing dissent (Kim, 2008; Duncan, 2001). Many women in the Global South do not have the same opportunities as those in the Global North to show their protest openly. Silence then becomes resistance for them. Through silence, they express their rejection and opposition to norms, roles, and ideas they do not support.

An intersectional feminist framework helps capture this nuanced, intersectional idea of resistance and dissent, which are shaped by race, region, religion, culture, caste, and gender. Minoo Alinia (2015) discusses Patricia Hill Collins' idea of intersectionality in relation to issues of oppression, resistance, and 'domination' (Alinia, 2015, p. 2335). The author points out, in connection to African American women's experiences of oppression and resistance, that there are differences within the "collective identity" (Alinia, 2015, p. 2335) as individual African American woman comes from different social, economic, age, religion, and sexual backgrounds (Alinia, 2015). Thus, any form of domination affects each African-American woman differently. Alinia argues that domination works not only through big structures but in the everyday lives of the African American women based on how they are positioned in society (Alinia, 2015, pp. 2334-2336). There is no one way of understanding domination, as there is no singular understanding of resistance. When speaking about Hindu women, it is also not a collective identity. Each Hindu woman is positioned differently in a society and is resisting structures, norms, and gender roles in multiple ways.

The intersectional feminist approach also helped me to address a key concern I had about Humes' (2000) invaluable research on the *Devi Mahatmya*. Humes' examination of the text through a feminist lens highlights the relevance of the text in the contemporary context. However, Humes did not examine the text through an intersectional feminist lens in the context of Hindu nationalism's contextualization of the mainstream Hindu goddesses. Her research explores a crucial question in showing how the text can be empowering, but leaves out the question of caste, region, gender, and class in the representation of the goddesses in the text, which I addressed in my research. The intersectional feminist approach helps analyze how the goddess is eulogized in the text, what forms and meanings are attached to the goddess imagery, and how empowering the goddess representations are in *Devi Mahatmya*.

IMAGERY

Intersectionality is not just about listing multiple identity categories like gender, race, religion, caste, class, and ethnicity. It provides a qualitatively different lens for understanding how interlocking systems of power operate through various social identities. Intersectionality reveals how power and exclusion are embedded in the symbolic representations of goddesses under Hindutva politics, where goddess iconography serves as a political and ideological tool. The imagery of the goddess in Hindutva discourse conveys Brahmanical patriarchal gender norms and values. The goddess imagery conveys a homogeneous Hindu identity and Hindu nation, defining the role of Hindu women in the nation and nationalism. Power and patriarchy are reinforced and maintained through the imagery of goddesses.

An intersectional analysis becomes central to the analysis of what the goddess imagery truly represents under Hindu nationalism. In discussing intersectionality, Crenshaw's representational intersectionality emphasizes how marginalization is perpetuated through representations (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1283). Through this framework, Crenshaw emphasizes how race and gender intersect to produce notions of "racial and sexual subordination" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1283) in women of color,

prevalent in American popular culture (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1282-1283). Drawing from Crenshaw's argument, intersectionality helps to underscore the exclusionary and discriminatory gender roles and notions maintained through the representation of goddesses in dominant Hindutva discourse, which overlooks the diverse, empowering, and plural representations of the goddess. While intersectionality helps identify problems with goddess representations in Hindutva politics, it also reveals the aspects of ambiguity, regional diversity, and empowering elements in the depiction of goddesses in *Devi* Mahatmya and in oral narratives of women

When I discuss the imagery of goddesses in my research, I am not referring to calendar art, paintings, or photographs. In the case of *Devi Mahatmya*, I am examining a textual representation of the goddess and how she is portrayed in the text. In the Hindutva narrative, I am speaking about references to goddesses drawn from epics and scriptures. For Hindutva's representations, the primary sources include the websites of organizations such as the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, Durga Vahini, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, and Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh, as well as books, symbols, speeches, pamphlets, and writings mentioned on these websites. The oral interviews of Hindu women presented multiple imaginings of goddesses. These imaginings of goddesses are ideas that women believe in. Visual representations are vital in redefining identities and have a significant impact on the public imagination. In my research, imagery of goddesses is present in the text and women's words. They are not separate but related.

However, there are instances where I have discussed goddess symbols used by some Hindutva organizations, such as Durga Vahini and Rashtra Sevika Samiti, on their websites. Other than that, there are mentions of female historical figures, such as Ahilyabai and Jijabai, sourced from blogs, magazines, and information featured on websites. In the case of goddess symbols, I used visual content analysis to examine the symbols. Seyidoglu et al. (2022) employ visual content analysis to examine the images of athletes on North American magazine covers, aiming to capture the disparity in

representation between racialized and non-racialized athletes (Seyidoglu et al., 2022). Visual content analysis helps to examine the 'inequalities' (Seyidoglu et al., 2022, p. 650) in visual representations. I followed visual content analysis to show the North Indian, upper-caste aspect in goddess symbols used by Hindutva organizations.

EMPOWERMENT

The analytical framework used in my research draws on feminist intersectional theory to analyze empowerment, resistance, plurality, and varied goddess imagery in Hindutva discourse, *Devi Mahatmya*, and the lived experiences of Hindu women. Such an analysis highlights the diversity in goddess representations, as reflected in both written and spoken accounts of Hindu women. The discussion shows how Hindu women's interpretations of goddesses are linked to the wider notions of power and exclusion prevalent in Hindutva's discourse on goddesses. By using an intersectional feminist lens, I move beyond understanding empowerment as related to economic development and explore how empowerment relates to Hindu women's resistance against Brahmanical patriarchy and Hindutva discourse through their imagination of the divine feminine and the complex depiction of goddess imagery in the text *Devi Mahatmya*. In doing so, I follow the feminist concept of women's empowerment as put forward by Cecilia M.B. Sardenberg (2008), Srilatha Batliwala (1994; 2007), Naila Kabeer (1999; 2005), and Amy Allen (1999).

The term, empowerment, has been used in the development field to denote the upliftment of women, economic growth, and welfare (Batliwala, 1994, p. 127). It has been appropriated by political organizations, state institutions, NGOs, and other grassroots organizations to promote varied agendas (Nazneen et al., 2014, p. 55). Sardenberg (2008) notes that the notion of empowerment advertised by governmental state bodies and developmental organizations differs from the feminist notion of empowerment. Empowerment is used as an alternative term for 'development' instead of referring to "emancipating origins" of the term (Sardenberg, 2008, p. 18). When discussing women's

empowerment in particular, Sardenberg notes that the focus is mostly on the macro-level growth and development of women, but not on the aspects of how empowerment affects their everyday lives, such as whether empowerment challenges the patriarchal system and systemic barriers that affect women (Sardenberg, 2008). Keshab Chandra Mandal (2013) discusses a broader framework of women's empowerment, highlighting the multifaceted understanding of the term and its implications for achieving women's equal position in society. Mandal (2013) discusses the idea of "social empowerment" (Mandal, 2013, p. 19), which not only focuses on strengthening women's equal relations in society but also acknowledges the oppression that persists, not only based on gender but also on multiple intersecting identities like religion, disability, ethnicity, class, and race, leading to different forms of discrimination experienced by women (Mandal, 2013).

The notion of women's empowerment emerged during the 1970s, driven by multiple women's movements, particularly the Third World Feminist movement, which challenged the simplistic idea of empowerment that focused primarily on economic development (Batliwala, 1994, pp. 127-128). The economic aspect did not address the structural problems that affect the conditions of women (Batliwala, 1994). Feminists understand women's empowerment as a process that involves transformation and struggle not only to challenge patriarchy but also to identify the power relations in race, class, gender, and, in the Indian context, religion, ethnicity, and caste that have an impact on determining women's position in Third World countries (Batliwala, 2007, p. 558). What is important here to note is that an intersectional understanding of empowerment situates it in a Global South standpoint, where not only patriarchy but also caste, class, and religion play a crucial role in determining women's position in society. These social factors are part of power relations that support a gendered model and help in maintaining the structural barriers that create obstacles for women to become empowered. Batliwala (2007) cites the work of South Asian feminists who defined empowerment as a process "of transforming the relations of power between individuals and social

groups" (Batliwala, 2007, p. 560). The transformation includes redefining the power relations between men and women “within and across social categories” (Batliwala, 2007, p. 560).

S. Batliwala (1994; 2007), Kabeer (1999; 2005), and Allen (1999) identify 'power' as an essential aspect of the concept of empowerment. Kabeer defines women’s empowerment as “the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 435). The focus is on having the power to make those choices (Kabeer, 1999; 2005). Kabeer (1999; 2005) identifies three dimensions of the concept of empowerment: resources, agency, and achievements. These three dimensions are interconnected. According to Kabeer, agency is the core part of empowerment, as it is the process through which one makes choices and decisions (Kabeer, 2005, p. 14). Resources are used to exercise that agency, and achievement is the result of exercising the choice (Kabeer, 2005, p. 14). These three dimensions, Kabeer notes, represent “the pathways” (Kabeer, 2005, p. 15) of empowerment. Batliwala states that the word power is a key component of the term empowerment (Batliwala, 1994, p. 129). Allen states that in the feminist concept of power as empowerment, the focus is on "power as the ability to empower and transform oneself, others, and the world" (Allen, 1999, p. 18). Empowerment, as feminists define it, means questioning how power works and taking charge of the “sources of power" (Batliwala, 1994, p. 130), where the power is divided equally between castes, classes, gender, races, and other social categories. According to Batliwala, empowerment includes three goals: dismantling patriarchy, transforming the systemic and structural forces that support discrimination based on gender, race, and class; and finally empowering marginalized women’s access and ensure control over "material and informational resources" (Batliwala, 1994, p. 130).

Sardenberg (2008) argues that when considering women's empowerment, we must also consider the inequalities perpetuated by patriarchy, as well as those perpetuated through caste, religion, class, and other social categories (Sardenberg, 2008). The intersectional understanding of

empowerment helps address the unequal situation of women in the Global North and the Global South, which also becomes a determining factor when considering women's empowerment globally in the context of geographical locations (Sardenberg, 2008, p. 20). Patriarchy is not a linear model. It is different across the Global North and Global South. In South Asia, particularly in the Indian context, women have limited control over their bodies, resources, and decision-making abilities, which significantly impacts their everyday lives (Batliwala, 1994). It is not to say that they do not have power (Batliwala, 1994). There are multiple instances where, through their traditional roles as wife, mother, and daughter, women have tried to make a difference in their personal spaces and everyday lives (Batliwala, 1994). However, the imposition of ideal images of Indian womanhood and overemphasis on values of submission, chastity, obedience, and sacrifice forces women to follow that image and stay submissive. Limited access to resources puts women in a compromised position, and they cannot challenge and break down everything whenever they want to. Religion, caste, class, and other social categories play a role in controlling women's self-expression, independence, and sexuality. Thus, women's empowerment must also involve self-assertion, control over one's body, sexuality, and access to power. In the South Asian context, women's empowerment can be present in simple acts that show resilience or convey courage. It may not be an extreme form of resistance. The intersectional understanding of empowerment is crucial in my research, as it helps capture negotiations, challenges, resistance, and subversions of gendered structures through ordinary women's perceptions of goddesses.

CONCEPT OF ORDINARY HINDU WOMEN

When discussing ordinary women's ideas of goddesses, I employ an intersectional feminist perspective to highlight their lived experiences, which are often marginalized in the dominant goddess narrative under Hindutva politics. By using an intersectional feminist framework, I challenge the notion of understanding Hindu women as a single, uniform group, recognizing the various factors such as caste,

class, ethnicity, region, age, sexuality, and religion that influence women's perspectives on goddesses. I am aware that the term Hindu woman comes with baggage, as it is an elitist, upper-caste, middle-class notion that marginalizes non-Hindu and Dalit (untouchables), Adivasi (Tribal) women (Ganguly, 2024). My use of the term 'ordinary' is deliberate and specific. When I say 'ordinary women,' I mean women who are not influential figures or who live their lives without any extraordinary privileges. These women can be housewives, corporate employees, educators, researchers, professors, and students, living at the intersections of multiple social identities. Social categories also include age, urban/rural background, and marital status, which can contribute to shaping their lived experiences. These women are not celebrated or public figures, but their lives are connected with Hindu goddesses through rituals, festivals, and everyday worship culture. I am centering their lived experiences, voices, and interpretations of goddesses in my research.

CONCEPT OF PLURALITY

The intersectional feminist framework, in my research, emphasizes the plurality and alternative imaginings of Hindu goddesses, embedded in the text, *Devi Mahatmya*, and in the lived experiences of ordinary Hindu women. The plurality in goddess imagery and worship tradition challenges the homogeneous Hindutva representations. An intersectional approach towards plurality allows for ambiguity, contradictions, complexities, and ambivalence in how goddesses are imagined and interpreted. Plurality symbolizes choice, freedom to worship, draw inspiration from, and follow any forms and versions of goddesses. Plurality in goddess imagery shows acceptance of all forms of goddesses, including those that challenge Brahmanical patriarchy and transgress normative gendered norms. Plurality in goddess imagery serves as an 'antidote' (Bhattacharya Saxena, 2021, p. 288) to the Hindutva nationalist representations of goddesses that align with Brahmanical patriarchal ideologies, leaving no room for multiple understandings and interpretations.

SECTION 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

SECTION 2.1 HINDU NATIONALISM, IDEOLOGY AND INSTITUTIONS

Multiple scholars have analyzed Hindutva politics as a project that promotes exclusion based on different social categories, rooted in religious and ethnic majoritarianism and Brahmanical supremacy. M.S. Golwalkar's *Bunch of Thoughts* (1968) and *We or Our Nationhood Defined* (1939) support the divisive ideology that Hindutva politics promotes in support of the formation of a Hindu nation. He presents a definition of the Hindu identity by posing the question, "how do you define a 'Hindu'?" (Golwalkar, 1968, p. 46) and prescribes ways to live a traditional Hindu life, by which he referred to Hindu ideals, traditions, gods, and practicing the Hindu customs in daily life to become a true Hindu. Tracing back to Hinduism's origin, Golwalkar considered the Hindu religion the most ancient and Hindus as civilized and enlightened (Golwalkar, 1968, p. 47). To distinguish the Hindu community from others, he referred to Hindus as the Aryans, and others as 'Mlecchas' (Golwalkar, 1968, p. 47) or 'untouchables'. Golwalkar supported the project of Hindutva and the idea of a Hindu nation, following the footsteps of V.D. Savarkar [20]and other Hindu nationalist thinkers. There is little mention of women's roles in Hindu nationalism in the writings of Golwalkar. However, when discussing Hindu customs and traditions to understand true "Hindu Nationhood" (Golwalkar, 1968, p. 54), Golwalkar refers to the role of women, described as the "Divine Mother" (Golwalkar, 1968, p. 54), who would bestow blessings by uttering a holy word to her children. He viewed women as those who bear and rear children with good Hindu ideals. He emphasized the daily practice of chanting the holy words (Hindu hymns) and remaining dedicated to the service of the Bharat Mata[21] (Golwalkar, 1968).

[20] V.D. Savarkar is the founder of Hindutva ideology.

[21] Bharat Mata literally means Mother India. She is depicted as a goddess similar to the mainstream Hindu goddess Durga and was created during the 19th-century nationalist movement in India to symbolize the Indian territory.

In *WE or Our Nationhood Defined* (1939), Golwalkar defines India as primarily a Hindu Nation. He draws attention to the concept of nation and nationality, stating that the majority of the population in India is Hindu, which is why India should be regarded as a Hindu land (Golwalkar, 1939, pp. 24-25). He laid down the idea of India based on Hindutva ideology, in which he emphasizes the purity and the vision of the Hindu nation. Golwalkar stresses that the minority population living with religious differences is not part of the Hindu national life. Those people who will "abandon their differences" and 'adopt' the national Hindu religion, culture, and language are seen as part of the 'national race' (Golwalkar, 1939, p. 26). Although not grounded in a biological theory of race as natural kinds, Golwalkar's position on the "Hindu race" is, in some respects, similar to the Nazi policy of racial superiority, with one race ruling over others. However, Golwalkar's conception of race is not the same as the one that underpinned the Nazi genocide of Jews. Golwalkar advocated not the extermination of Muslims but cultural assimilation and reconversion. While there have been cases of lynching of minorities, especially Muslims, there has never been an extermination program grounded in biological race theory in India.

Golwalkar's vision of Hindus as a higher race has been critically analyzed by scholars like Chetan Bhatt (2001), who, in his book, *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies and Modern Myths*, extends this by examining the "intellectual and historical influences" (Bhatt, 2001, p.2) that led to the formation of Hindutva ideology. Bhatt explains that the Hindutva ideology is influenced by European ideas of primordialism, tracing its roots in British and German Orientalism (Bhatt, 2001). A key part of Hindu nationalism is "Aryanism" (Bhatt, 2001, p. 3) and "upper caste, religious, regional and vernacular elite" (Bhatt, 2001, p.3), solidifying their power. For Bhatt, Hindu nationalism has little to do with the concept of Hinduism or Hindu itself, and more to do with the Hindutva ideology that promotes an idea of 'Hinduness' (Bhatt, 2001, p. 77). Bhatt extends the discussion on Hindutva ideology as part of the existing scholarship on Hindutva politics and ideology by Christophe Jaffrelot (1993), who, in his article "Hindu Nationalism: Strategic Syncretism in Ideology Building", talks

about Hindu nationalist ideology as a "sub-category" of "strategic syncretism" (Jaffrelot, 1993, p. 517). The ideology is syncretic because it draws from the cultural principles and beliefs of groups perceived as opposed to Hindu groups, and it is strategic in the sense that it supports an ideology aimed at exerting control over other people or communities at a socio-political level (Jaffrelot, 1993, p. 517). Bhatt (2001) concludes his work by mentioning that a majoritarian rule under the BJP poses a challenge to the "secular, democratic and federal" (Bhatt, 2001, p. 178) structure of India, as the ideology of Hindu nationalism is not "equivalent to the expression of national identity of India or Indians" (Bhatt, 2001, p. 210).

This aspect of racial, casteist, and majoritarianism in Hindutva ideology is later critically analyzed by Christophe Jaffrelot (2007) in his book, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*, in which he offers a crucial investigation into the Hindu nationalist thought. He provides a detailed understanding of the structure of the *Sangh Parivar*, comprising the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), and the regional organisations formed by major Hindutva political bodies. Jaffrelot opines that Hindu nationalist ideology imitates the characteristics of those Hindutva groups considered enemies of the Hindu value system (Jaffrelot, 2007). He defines Hindu nationalism as a "conservative ideology" which favours Brahmanical ideas and the supremacy of the upper-caste (Jaffrelot, 2007, p. 24). The casteist and religious symbolism attached to the Hindutva ideology was further analyzed by Paola Bacchetta (2002) in her article, "Sacred Space in Conflict in India: The Babri Masjid Affair," where, apart from detailing the Babri Masjid demolition [22]to give a broader outlook of the Hindu nationalist project, Bacchetta shows how the Babri Masjid was projected as a symbol of "Muslim military invasions and Muslim male sexual aggression" against Hindu women and Bharat Mata (Mother India) (Bacchetta, 2002, p. 255). Bacchetta states that Hindu nationalism is a project of the elites and upper-caste Hindus. It uses religion and religious symbols for political gains (Bacchetta,

[22] In 1992, Babri Masjid was demolished by Hindutva groups to build a Ram Temple at the site of the mosque in Ayodhya, India. This event is commonly known as the Ram Janmabhoomi movement.

2002, pp. 255-259). Based on Hindutva ideology, the Hindu nation should be formed of Hindu men who are masculine and disciplined like armies, with much emphasis on the Hindu men to protect the Hindu nation and Hindu culture (Bacchetta, 2002).

Although scholars such as Bhatt (2001), Bacchetta (2002), and Jaffrelot (1993) critically discussed the ideological aspect of Hindutva politics and its casteist, racist, and religious connotations, in another seminal article, Christophe Jaffrelot and Edward Anderson (2018) expand on this trajectory by exploring the far-reaching effects of the Hindutva ideology in contemporary India. In the article, "Hindu nationalism and the 'saffronisation of the public sphere': an interview with Christophe Jaffrelot" (2018), Jaffrelot and Anderson highlight that Hindutva as an ideology has spread beyond the RSS and VHP. The authors argue that Hindutva ideology has been a driving force in creating new tensions like cow vigilantism that lead to cases of lynching, mob violence, communal riots against minority populations like Muslims, including lower caste and Dalits, stigmatization of minority groups, and an increase in Islamophobic sentiments among the general population in India (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018). Jaffrelot mentions two key points: first, that Hindutva ideology is gaining more acceptance due to saffron-clad religious and political leaders like Yogi Adityanath[23], who present themselves as religious renouncers, enjoy a sense of religious authority and superiority over the masses (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018). Second, the measures taken by the ruling government, like a ban on beef, calling India 'Bharat' and 'Hinduisation' (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018, p. 479) of street names, places, and memorials, and re-writing the past with a focus on Hindu identity, have led to the normalization of marginalization of Muslims and the non -Hindu population (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018).

Hindutva ideology is present not only in politics but also in various other spheres, including social roles, customs, religion, norms, and policies, among others. In relation to the contemporary

[23] Yogi Adityanath is the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, India.

socio-political scenario under Hindutva ideology that normalises minority rights violations, Tanika Sarkar, in her article, "Special guest contribution: is love without borders possible?" (2018), draws attention to the issue of Love-Jihad, where a false claim that Muslim men try to convert Hindu women through marriage is used to underpin a policy banning marriage between Muslim men and Hindu women, thereby stigmatizing and marginalizing Indian Muslim men and controlling Hindu women's sexuality. Love Jihad refers to a romantic relationship between a Muslim man and a Hindu woman, which is claimed by Hindutva groups as a strategy by Muslim men to lure and convert Hindu women (Sarkar, 2018). According to Sarkar, the policy of Love-Jihad introduced by the Hindu Right-wing party is a policy of creating "submissive subjects" (Sarkar, 2018, p. 7) and a way of controlling and regulating the agency and power of the minority community to question (Sarkar, 2018). This policy is deeply linked with the exclusive notion of the Hindu nation that Hindutva politics endorse. Giorgio Shani (2021), in "Towards a Hindu Rashtra: Hindutva, religion, and nationalism in India," argues that Hindutva ideology, which forms the core of Hindu nationalism, strongly believes and reinforces the idea that India belongs to the Hindu population. Based on the glorification of Hindu civilization, the political party BJP and its organizations filled the "ideological vacuum" (Shani, 2021, p. 275) that the Indian population was experiencing, in the post-Nehru era, leading to a transformation of nationalism into a "militant Hindu nationalism" (Shani, 2021, p. 275). Shani claims that in this current scenario, it is Muslims who are getting marginalized and targeted and are treated as second-category citizens (Shani, 2021).

Reflecting on the rise of the majoritarian rule under the Narendra Modi government in the present time, Angana P. Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen, and Christophe Jaffrelot (2019) in their edited book, *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India*, directly address the rise of “Hindu nationalist dominance” in the present time (Chatterji et al., 2019, p. 1). The authors primarily focus on Narendra Modi’s rise to power as a BJP leader and Prime Minister, whose leadership presents a different narrative from that of A.B. Vajpayee's from 1998 to 2004 (Chatterji et

al, 2019). The emphasis is on the BJP's nature of politics characterized by "populism, nationalism, authoritarianism, and majoritarianism," which supports a model that favours the corporates and the upper caste, coupled with "normalisation of anti-minority rhetoric" and communal sentiments (Chatterji et al., 2019, p.2). The authors critically examine the politics of representation through Narendra Modi's projection of himself as an "ordinary man" (Chatterji et al., 2019, p. 3) during the 2014 election campaign, an image in stark contrast to the elitism associated with the image of the Congress Party (opposition party) leader, Rahul Gandhi (Chatterji et al., 2019). His underprivileged family background, from purportedly working in his father's tea shop to becoming a political leader, along with his Other Backward Classes (OBC) status, overshadowed his background as an active member of the RSS and an ardent believer in the Hindutva ideology (Chatterji et al., 2019, pp. 3-4). This image continues to be a significant part of Modi's electoral strategy, as he is now seen as a Godson. The authors state that "Modi is a product of the RSS" (Chatterji et al., 2019, p.4). The Gujarat riot of 2002, under Modi's chief ministerial role, which was a calculated "pogrom against Muslims", turned him into a hero of the Hindu population (Chatterji et al., 2019, p. 4). The authors state that Modi, as a Hindutva leader, and the BJP, as a political party, are interested in only protecting the interests of the Hindus, simultaneously disadvantaging the minority communities (Chatterji et al., 2019, p.4).

While the above scholarly contribution focuses on Modi and the BJP's politics of representation, Nivedita Menon (2024) points to the Hindutva politics takeover of the state and state institutions. In her recent book, *Secularism as Misdirection: Critical Thought from the Global South* (2024), Menon focuses on the Hindutva organisations, which turned the Hindu *Rashtra* (nation) into a "state-led project" (Menon, 2024, p. 91). Menon defines Hindutva politics as a "Hindu supremacist project" which presents Hindutva and Brahmanism as Hinduism (Menon, 2024, p. 91). This argument is critical in the context of the co-optation of religious figures by Hindutva politics that presents a Brahmanical, upper-caste idea of religious icons. Menon's focus is on the Rashtriya Swayamsevak

Sangh's (RSS) role in the formation of the Hindu nation, which was spearheaded after the 2019 election, when the BJP won a majority of electoral votes (Menon, 2024). The push to form a Hindu nation began, first, with government policies, including the removal of Article 370 in Kashmir and the division of the state into three regions, as well as the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019 (Menon, 2024). Second, Menon discussed "stealth" (Menon, 2024, p. 92), which involved controlling state mechanisms, media, and, most importantly, the judiciary (Menon, 2024). Third is through social media and people who are paid to incite violence (Menon, 2024, pp. 92-93). Menon clearly states that RSS is not to be confused with a religious organisation (Menon, 2024). It is a political institution of Hindutva whose goal is to form a Hindu nation that will include only the Hindu upper-caste population, not Christians, Muslims, Parsis, or any other religious groups (Menon, 2024). On her point regarding "Global Hindutva" (Menon, 2024, p. 123), Menon highlights the reach of Hindutva politics in the Global North. She argues that Hindutva politics presents Hindus as victims and projects itself as a progressive ideology, supporting the cause of Hindus who are a minority (Menon, 2024). It presents itself as a movement resisting racist and capitalist structures (Menon, 2024, p. 124). However, Menon argues, the true intent behind the Hindutva ideology is rooted in racial superiority (Menon, 2024, p. 123).

SECTION 2.2 HINDUTVA, HINDU EPICS, AND GODS

The influence of Hindutva ideology and organizations goes beyond control over state institutions. Hindutva organizations are involved in co-opting Hindu epics like the *Ramayana*[24], along with Hindu gods and goddesses, especially Ram and Sita, using these as symbols of the Hindu nation to reinforce their ideological dominance. Hindutva organizations, through their selective appropriation of Hindu religious icons, craft their vision of the Hindu nation and legitimize the divisive ideology of Hindutva

[24] One of the Hindu religious epics.

politics. Jagdish Chaitanya (1993) and Arvind Rajagopal (2001) highlight this aspect of the cooptation of the Ram figure in Hindu nationalist politics and transforming Ram into a symbol of Hindutva politics.

Chaitanya (1993), in his article, "Ram Ke Nam: Documentary as Resistance," highlights the documentary film "Ram Ke Nam" (In the Name of Ram) by Anand Patwardhan (released in 1992)[25]. The context of the film is the Babri Masjid (mosque) demolition on December 6, 1992, in Ayodhya, India, by the Hindu nationalist groups (Patwardhan, 1992). It was believed that the mosque, built during the 16th century, was constructed in the birthplace of Lord Ram and a Hindu temple that originally existed on the same site. This led to the Ram Janmabhoomi[26] movement by Hindu nationalist groups who marched to Ayodhya to reclaim the site of Lord Ram by demolishing the mosque. The campaigns were led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), and other Hindutva organisations. The documentary film focuses on Hindutva's campaigns, marches, and rallies, featuring men dressed as Ram and other characters from the epic *Ramayana*. It documents the violent demolition of the mosque by the *Kar Sevaks* (activists of Hindutva politics) and the repercussions of the incident from the perspective of those at the periphery of society (Patwardhan, 1992; Chaitanya, 1993). Chaitanya argues that Patwardhan's documentary film is a 'resistance' (Chaitanya, 1993, p. 2646) to the majoritarian ideology that Hindu nationalists endorse. The author highlights the "majority communalism" aspect (Chaitanya, 1993, p. 2646) in the Hindu nationalist Ram Janmabhoomi campaign, which presents itself as a "re-assertion of tradition and culture" (Chaitanya, 1993, p. 2646). The Hindu nationalist groups appropriated the *Ramayana* epic and mythological figures to present Ram Janmabhoomi as a movement to save Hinduism (Chaitanya, 1993). It turned the mythical figure of Ram into a political figure in a campaign against the Muslims.

[25] This is a documentary film by Anand Patwardhan, produced and directed by him. Patwardhan, A. (Director & Producer). (1992). *Ram ke Naam* [Film].
[26] Literal meaning Ram's birthplace.

While Chaitanya (1993) discusses how Patwardhan's documentary film is a resistance to the use of Hindu religious icons in Hindutva politics, Rajagopal (2001) shows how media technologies helped legitimize the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign by Hindu nationalists. In his book, *Politics after Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* (2001), Arvind Rajagopal focuses on the serial adaptation of the *Ramayana* epic, which aired from January 1987 to August 1989 (Rajagopal, 2001). This adaptation became popular during the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, with people dressed as Ram and marching in support of the movement (Rajagopal, 2001). The author notes that the television series *Ramayana* and the characters from the series were adopted and appropriated by the movement to justify their unlawful demolition of the mosque (Rajagopal, 2001). *Kar Sevaks* (Hindutva activists), dressed as characters from the epic *Ramayana*, carried *Ram Silas*, or holy bricks, during the procession from Delhi to Ayodhya, to justify the movement as a religious march rather than a political one (Rajagopal, 2001, p. 30).

Rajagopal (2001) discusses the role of television in spreading the popularity of figures like Ram as the icon of Bharat[27]. However, Rajagopal (2001) does not delve deeply into the representation of Ram and the use of Hindu epics by Hindutva organizations, which Karline McLain does in her essay, "Sita and Shurpanakha: Symbols of the Nation in the Amar Chitra Katha" (2001). According to McLain, the comic book series *Amar Chitra Katha* or "The Immortal Picture Stories" played a role in "identity formation" (McLain, 2001, p. 32). McLain (2001) speaks about the use of religious and mythological figures like Ram and Hindu epics in political conquest by Hindutva ideologues. An example of this is the Ram Janmabhoomi movement in 1992. The author cites how Hindutva politics claimed Ram as the founder of India and "celebrated Ramayana as a source of national integration" (McLain, 2001, p. 32). McLain goes further, saying that the epic played a role in formulating gender roles, supported by Hindutva ideologues (McLain, 2001). Hindutva leaders eulogized the characters

[27] India.

of Ram and Sita as ideal Hindu role models and the epitome of morality, virtue, and chastity that every Hindu should follow (McLain, 2001). McLain also argues that Ramayana is retold in various ways in India (McLain, 2001, p. 32). *Amar Chitra Katha* overlooked the variations and adopted the tale that goes well with the Hindutva narrative, reinforcing Brahmanical patriarchal models and gender stereotypes and depicting women as symbols of a nation devoid of agency (McLain, 2001, p. 33).

The appropriations of Hindu gods and goddesses in Hindutva discourse not only support a patriarchal gender model but also a caste hierarchy. Both Uma Chakravarti (1998) and Kancha Ilaiah (1996) critique the caste aspect in the Hindutva ideological and political appropriations. In her article, "Saffroning the Past: Of Myths, Histories, and Right-Wing Agendas" (1998), Chakravarti notes that in the late 1980s, a shift toward right-wing ideology and the fascist ideology of Hindutva parties occurred. The middle class and upper caste supported Hindutva ideology in the hope of reconstructing India's "glorious past" (Chakravarti, 1998, p. 225). The author argues that mega serials like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* played a role in creating the glorious past imagination that Hindutva ideology promised to deliver (Chakravarti, 1998). Chakravarti introduced the caste angle into the imagination of the Hindu past, arguing that serials like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* promoted a particular idea of Hindu culture, facilitating Brahmanical Hindu tradition (Chakravarti, 1998).

Ilaiah (1996) in the book, *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture, and Political Economy*, criticizes "Hindutva Brahmanism" (Tharu, 1996, p. 2019; Ilaiah, 1996) from the perspective of a "dalitbahujan[28]" (Ilaiah, 1996, p. 5). Addressing the question of Hindu identity that forms the core of Hindutva politics, Ilaiah (1996) talks about the differential experiences of Dalit-Bahujan in India and those of upper-caste Hindu Brahmins. The author challenges the monolithic Hindu identity, stating that the Hindu identity does not reflect and represent all populations in India (Ilaiah, 1996). Ilaiah brings to the discussion Dalit-Bahujan goddesses and icons as counter-

[28] Dalit-Bahujan comprises Dalits (untouchables), Bahujan (Other Backward Classes), and the Tribal population in India.

narratives to challenge Brahmanical Hinduism. The Dalit-Bahujan goddesses serve as a critique of the unequal gender relations that are rooted in Brahmanical goddess representations (Ilaiah, 1996). The author compares the obedient figure of Sita, which Brahmanical Hinduism supports, with Dalit heroines and goddesses like Pochamma, who break the boundaries of caste, class, and gender, thereby transgressing Brahmanical patriarchal norms (Ilaiah, 1996, p. 92). Ilaiah's (1996) focus on Dalit goddesses, who are viewed in ways that are more liberating and empowering, thereby opens up the scope for discussing goddesses and goddess traditions from the aspects of caste, class, gender, and ethnicity. The introduction of Dalit goddesses by Ilaiah (1996) challenges the homogeneous understanding of Hindu goddesses, promoted by Hindu nationalists. The discussion shifts the focus to regional and caste-based worship traditions that are integral to the goddess tradition in India.

The heterogeneity in Hindu gods and goddess worship is also highlighted by Rishiraj Sen (2024), who critiques Hindutva discourse on notions of Hinduism, Hindu identity, and the Hindu nation. In his article, "National god of India? The Hindutva project of building a homogenous India" (2024), the author discusses the banning of beef and the control of freedom of speech under the present government (Sen, 2024). Sen highlights the formation of the Ram temple in Ayodhya by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2024, who asked every citizen to join the inauguration ceremony by lighting candles at home and issued a public holiday in certain states (Sen, 2024). Hindutva political parties tried to create the impression that the entire nation is in favour of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, the same controversial site with a history of Bari Mosque demolition (Sen, 2024). Sen argues that while the Hindutva political parties are trying to create a narrative of Ram as the god of the entire Hindu population, there are multiple worshipping cultures in India surrounding the deities (Sen, 2024). He cites his personal preference for worshipping Kali and Manasa[29] rather than Ram (Sen, 2024). The worship ritual of goddesses such as Kali and Manasa consists of meat, alcohol, and not the

[29] The snake goddess popular in some parts of India especially West Bengal.

vegetarianism associated with Hindutva's interpretation of Hinduism (Sen, 2024). He discusses how in certain parts of India, people worship Ravana, the villain in the *Ramayana* epic, rather than Ram as a god (Sen, 2024). Sen states that Hindutva politics uses Ram and *Ramayana* in the homogenization of Hindu identity (Sen, 2024). Ram, as the "National God of India" (Sen, 2024, p. 195), is opposed to the diversity of deities present in India (Sen, 2024). Together, the scholarly literature points to the casteist, classist, and patriarchal nature in the Hindutva narrative of Hindu religious figures, the Hindu nation, and Hinduism. It is a narrative designed to justify the formation of a homogeneous Hindu identity and nation that systematically marginalizes dissenting voices, diversity, and alternative interpretations of both Hindu texts and deities.

SECTION 2.3 WOMEN AND GODDESSES IN HINDUTVA

The question of women's roles and goddesses is closely linked to Hindutva politics. Scholars such as Henrik Berglund (2009) and Sikata Banerjee (1996, 2003, 2006, 2010) have examined how Hindu nationalist groups mobilize women through the use of symbolic models of goddesses. Berglund (2009), for instance, in the article "Including Women: Strategies of Mobilization Within the Hindu Nationalist Movement", points to the changing nature of the Hindutva movement, with women becoming active participants and not passive actors. The author states that men mainly led the Hindu nationalist movement, which changed in the 1980s and 90s as women joined in more significant numbers (Berglund, 2009). Speaking about Hindutva ideologues, such as Savarkar and Golwalkar, to discuss the limited roles initially envisioned for women, the author argues that the role models supported by the Hindutva ideology are Savitri[30] and Sita[31] (Berglund, 2009). But the Babri demolition

[30] Savitri is viewed as an ideal Hindu wife like Sita. She married Satyavan, who died within a year of marriage because of a curse. So, Savitri followed Yama, the god of death to bring back her husband's life. (Pandey, 2024, p. 109). See Pandey, S. (2024). 'Sati, Women, and Narratives: Transcendental congruence in the tales of *Savitri* and *Satyavan* and the *Bihula-Bishahri Gatha*'. *Sampratyaya,* 1(2):107-117. DOI: 10.21276/smprt.202412.12.a9 for more information.

[31] Wife of Ram in *Ramayana*.

saw women leaders like Uma Bharti and Sadhvi Rithambara, who were more assertive women leaders, mobilizing men in the Babri demolition movement (Berglund, 2009). However, despite the violent activism shown by women during the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, the traditional gender image of Sita remains significant in Hindutva discourse, which limits women's roles within the Hindu right-wing organizations.

Expanding on the aspect of violent activism by women, Sikata Banerjee (1996), in her article, "The Feminization of Violence in Bombay: Women in the Politics of the Shiv Sena," introduces the concept of "feminization of violence" (Banerjee, 1996, p. 1213) showing how organizations like Shiv Sena (a regional Hindutva party in Bombay) mobilize women in organising a riot in Bombay that followed after the demolition of Babri Masjid (Banerjee, 1996). She explores women's roles in the riot as members of the Shiv Sena who draw inspiration from the symbolic figure of the goddess Kali. In her post-Babri violence analysis, Banerjee argues that the appropriation of Kali has legitimised women's militant role in Hindutva organisations, but it did not challenge the patriarchal authority (Banerjee, 1996). The image of Kali is considered more aggressive and assertive than that of figures like Sita, which is equally valued in the Hindutva model of womanhood (Banerjee, 1996). However, the appropriation of Kali by Hindutva women leaders has led to violent displays of protests in the Hindu nationalist movement (Banerjee, 1996). Banerjee notes that feminists have also appropriated Kali, but not in ways that Hindutva discourse has co-opted the figure. Although Kali is a warrior goddess, her appropriation does not mean "celebration of violence" against minority communities (Banerjee, 1996, pp. 1214-1215). Focusing on the Shiv Sena's mobilization of women, Banerjee discusses the limited understanding of emancipation in the Shiv Sena's incorporation of women, presenting militant activism as emancipation but not addressing the patriarchal structure (Banerjee, 1996, p. 1215).

Sikata Banerjee further explores this tension in her later publications (2003; 2006; 2010), where she highlights the different models of women's involvement in Hindutva politics, which is characterized by masculinized nationalism. In "Gender and Nationalism: The Masculinization of Hinduism and Female Political Participation in India" (2003), Banerjee points out two crucial aspects. One, the author talks about the "masculinization of nationalism" under Hindu nationalist politics, which evokes male icons, myths, and historical figures that talk about masculinity and glorify the image of "an aggressive male warrior"(Banerjee, 2003, p. 167). Two, the author discusses female participation in Hindutva politics through female icons and imagery drawn from the cultural, religious, and historical contexts that created a space for women within this masculine nationalism of Hindutva (Banerjee, 2003). The author argues that apart from passive roles, women enter Hindu nationalism as "citizen warriors" (Banerjee, 2003, p. 175), following the footsteps of warrior goddesses like Durga and historical figures like the Queen of Jhansi[32] (Banerjee, 2003, p. 175). She also cites the case of Uma Bharti, Sadhvi Rithambara, and Vijayraje Scindia, all prominent Hindutva women leaders, who joined the movement as celibates, drawing attention to another template through which women entered the movement (Banerjee, 2003, p. 176). The models of warrior and celibacy have broken the traditional concept of women only contributing to nationalist politics as nurturers (Banerjee, 2003). Banerjee draws attention to the Hindu Right's women's contributions and how, even within the limited gender roles, women have become effective agents of Hindu nationalist politics (Banerjee, 2003).

In "Armed masculinity, Hindu nationalism and female political participation in India" (2006), Banerjee highlights two popular models of Hindu nationalist, which are the "Hindu soldier and warrior monk" (Banerjee, 2006, p. 62) and how after British imperialist rule in India, the importance is laid

[32] Rani Lakshmibai is known as the Queen of Jhansi. She was married to Gangadhar Rao of Jhansi. After his death, she assumed the role of the Queen. She is known for her leadership role in the 1857 Indian mutiny against British rule. See Ray, B. (2008, October 04). Lakshmi Bai [Lakshmibai], rani of Jhansi (1827/1828–1858), warrior queen in India. In *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Retrieved 26 Sep. 2025, from https://www-oxforddnb com.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-94944 for more information.

on rejuvenation of Hindu manliness and martial power to defend motherland (Banerjee, 2006). Banerjee's focus, similar to the previous one, is on the female participation models. However, in this, Banerjee focuses on the limitations of women's roles and examines in detail the problems in the models of participation that demand women to be chaste and virtuous (Banerjee, 2006, p. 62). The author critiques the roles from the Indian feminist standpoint, skeptical of the nature of women's activism in Hindu nationalist politics. Banerjee argues that the empowerment offered by the warrior, heroic, and celibate models is limited to fulfilling duties in support of the Hindu nationalist political goal and not to resist the "gendered power imbalances" of a patriarchal system (Banerjee, 2006, p. 62).

Banerjee further explores this issue in her article "Women, Muscular Nationalism and Hinduism in India: Roop Kanwar and the *Fire* Protests" (2010), where she explores women's position in Hindutva discourse as she critically examines the multiple ways a nation can be imagined as a woman and how women can take part in nation-building. She highlights the traditional role of mothers as chaste wives and then as goddesses (Banerjee, 2010). Banerjee argues that traditional models have affected women's lives regarding honor, modesty, and maintaining an image, citing the real case of self-immolation in India in 1987, the Roop Kanwar case, and the protest of Hindutva leaders and politicians against Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* (1996), which portrays a same-sex relationship between two Hindu women. She talks about the political instrumentalization of women's bodies in Hindutva ideology (Banerjee, 2010). Banerjee notes that in muscular nationalism, the focus remains on the chastity of women, which assumes women's bodies as "border guards" (Banerjee, 2010, p. 271) of the nation, emphasizing the honor and purity of the Hindu woman (Banerjee, 2010).

Amrita Basu (1996) further provides a critical analysis of the celibate women model in Hindu nationalism. The author argues that the entry of ascetic women into Hindutva politics did not necessarily dismantle the gender hierarchical structure (Basu, 1996). In her article, "The Gendered Imagery and Women's Leadership of Hindu Nationalism" (1996), she primarily focuses on three well-

known Hindutva female leaders, Uma Bharti, Vijayraje Scindia, and Sadhvi Rithambara, critically examining their leadership positions in the Hindutva movement. Three of them entered Hindu nationalism as ascetics and as celibate warriors of Hindutva politics. The author notes that, as ascetics who possess the religious and "moral authority" (Basu, 1996, p. 70), these women played active roles in various BJP-led campaigns, including the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign (Basu, 1996). The presence of figures like Sadhvi Rithambara conveyed that women can enter politics and activism without having to transgress the ideals of Hindu womanhood (Basu, 1996). Basu argues that although this speaks about the fact that the celibate role offered that space for women to join as ascetics and achieve their political goal as women but that that did not specifically address "gender asymmetry" (Basu, 1996, p. 70) and inequality in terms of exercising the power as women both within and outside of Hindutva politics (Basu, 1996, p. 70). The celibate women leaders are bound by the patriarchal norms that ultimately valorise chastity, honour, and moral purity of a Hindu woman.

Paola Bacchetta (1993; 2002) further discusses these symbolic models of Hindu femininity within Hindu nationalist politics by examining the internal functioning of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti and how the organization employs the goddess imagery. In "All our goddesses are armed: Religion, resistance, and revenge in the life of a militant Hindu nationalist woman" (1993), the author examines Kamlabehn's life story, an active member of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti (the Samiti), a right-wing women's organization, and her engagement with Hindutva's concept of goddesses. Bacchetta (1993) highlights key points in the connection between Hindutva women and goddesses. First, through Kamlabehn's interviews, the author explores her complex relationship with goddess figures, such as Kali and Ashtabhuja[33](Bacchetta, 1993). As an active member of the Samiti and responsible for

[33] Ashtabhuja is a goddess worshipped by the Rashtra Sevika Samiti. This figure resembles Durga, Lakshmi, and Saraswati, all Hindu goddesses that Hindutva discourse glorifies. See Bacchetta, P. (1993). All our goddesses are armed: Religion, resistance, and revenge in the life of a militant Hindu nationalist woman. *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, *25*(4), 38–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.1993.10416137 for more information.

teaching warrior skills to young women of the organization, Kali for Kamlabehn is a fierce figure, Bharat Mata (Mother India) is a nurturing personality, and Ashtabhuja is the one with knowledge of warrior skills (Bacchetta, 1993, p. 46). Second, through her narrative, Bacchetta examines Kamlabehn's everyday life as an activist and her ideas of resistance and religion. Third, Bacchetta discusses Kamlabehn's agency within the Samiti (Bacchetta, 1993). Fourth, the author highlights the classical text *Devi Mahatmya* as an important reference for the Samiti, citing figures like Ashtabhuja and Kali from the text (Bacchetta, 1993), illustrating how symbolic imagery of goddesses shapes ideas of activism, religion, and nationalism for Hindutva women activists.

In her book chapter, titled "Hindu Nationalist Women: On the Use of the Feminine Symbolic to (Temporarily) Displace Male Authority" (2002), Bacchetta specifically presents the ideology, structure, and vision of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti (the Samiti) that supports patriarchal and caste-based hierarchy. Bacchetta's understanding of the Samiti is crucial as it highlights how Samiti, through its ideology, shapes women's identities (Bacchetta, 2002). According to Bacchetta, the models that Samiti presents for Hindu women are targeted explicitly at upper-caste, middle-class Hindu women (Bacchetta, 2002). Bacchetta highlights the significance of three central goddesses — Bharat Mata, Ashtabhuja, and Sita as role models for Samiti women, and what each goddess means to Samiti's women (Bacchetta, 2002). Bharat Mata, or Mother India, represents the culture, motherhood, and nurturing abilities that a woman embodies (Bacchetta, 2002). Ashtabhuja, a creation of Lakshmibai Kelkar, the founder of Samiti, is a model of the quintessential qualities found in a Hindu woman, such as intellect, courage, and prosperity (Bacchetta, 2002, p. 162). Finally, Sita represents a "conscious" (Bacchetta, 2002, p. 162) woman, wife, and mother, and is, above all, the most exemplary of the models (Bacchetta, 2002). The goddess symbolism in the Samiti serves as both a disciplinary framework for women and a means to shape their identity as Hindutva activists, reinforcing their commitment to Hindutva politics.

While Bacchetta (1993;2002) discusses the goddess symbolism in the Rashtra Sevika Samiti and women's engagement with goddesses, Anja Kovacs (2004) and Atreyee Sen (2015) critique Hindutva's use of goddesses by highlighting the politics of representation. The authors explore the symbolism of Durga and how her complex representation is simplified into a more basic image by Hindu nationalists. Kovacs (2004), in "You don't understand, we are at war! Refashioning Durga in the service of Hindu nationalism", examines the representation of the goddess Durga by two Hindu nationalist organizations -Rashtra Sevika Samiti and Durga Vahini. The author argues how Durga's representation is used to validate the model of female activism and participation in Hindu nationalist politics (Kovacs, 2004). Kovacs examines the contradictions in goddess imagery among women members of organizations, presenting a deeper understanding of the nature of activism and the militant roles of women within Hindutva discourse (Kovacs, 2004). Similarly, Atreyee Sen's (2015) article, "The Hindu Goddess in Indian Politics", also focuses on Durga's portrayal within the context of Hindutva ideology. Sen (2015) explores how the invocation of goddess Durga contributed to increased women's participation in Hindutva's mission (Sen, 2015). By examining Durga, Sen underscores the importance of religious figures in mainstream politics, who are no longer seen solely as separate religious icons (Sen, 2015). The presence of religious icons shows how religious figures are increasingly used to advance political goals (Sen, 2015). Although Durga's representation may seem empowering to women, it ultimately offers a limited view of women's involvement in Hindutva politics.

Focusing on the politics of representation, especially that of Bharat Mata (Mother India) under Hindutva politics, the goddess is transformed into a symbolic figure of the Hindu nation. The representation of Bharat Mata in Hindutva discourses raises questions about caste, class, and gender hierarchies, which Nivedita Menon (2017) critically examines in her essay, "Bharat Mata and her Unruly Daughters." Drawing on the overall political use of goddesses, Menon (2017) argues that the Hindutva project adopted a Brahmanical Hindu model of worship and imagery, with a fair-

complexioned Bharat Mata signaling an upper-caste Hindu identity (Menon, 2017). She points out how Bharat Mata was transformed into a Hindu goddess, whose sons are all Hindus and not Muslims, and people of any other communities (Menon, 2017). Menon also challenges the Brahmanical view of Bharat Mata, depicting her as dark-skinned and accompanied by a black buffalo, rather than the sacred Mother Cow (Menon, 2017). She discusses the Dalit-Adivasi (Lower caste, Tribal) standpoint in Bharat Mata's representation, challenging the elitist nature of Hindutva philosophy. The dark-skinned Bharat Mata symbolizes a Dalit-Adivasi woman (Tribal) from rural India, representing the daughters excluded from Hindutva's idea of the Hindu nation (Menon, 2017).

The politics of reconfiguring goddesses was accompanied by paradigms of ideal Hindu womanhood, conveying women's expected roles within Hindutva organizations. These paradigms are not only drawn from the chaste, fair-skinned, upper-caste Bharat Mata imagery but also from the *Virangana* models of the nationalist era in the 19th century, which consist of both goddesses and historical, mythical female figures. Kathryn Hansen (1988) and Manisha Sethi (2002) both critically explore the *Virangana* paradigm, providing insights into its use in nationalist contexts and in the current scenario under Hindutva politics, as well as the recent changes the paradigm has undergone.

Hansen (1988), in her article, "The Virangana in North Indian History: Myth and Popular Culture", does not directly discuss the use of Hindu goddesses or the *Virangana* model in the Hindutva project. The author traces the use of female figures in the mainstream nationalist struggle in India and its implications for women. Two things are emphasized in the article. First, Hansen (1988) discusses the pattern of role models set for women, from which women are expected to draw inspiration and follow. Second, she identifies different paradigms and raises important questions about what the goddess model means for women and what it says about society's treatment of women (Hansen, 1988). The highlight is the *Virangana* paradigm, used in the nationalist movement in India to inspire and motivate women to join politics. Hansen states that for high-caste Hindus, the famous model for

women is the "epic heroine type" (Hansen, 1988, p. WS25), which is the chaste, virtuous, obedient, and sacrificial model that follows the traditional roles of wives and mothers (Hansen, 1988). Hansen discusses figures like Savitri, Sita, and Anasuya[34], who are considered ideal wives or Satis[35]. There is also the paradigm of powerful goddesses, such as Durga and Kali. However, all the goddesses are seen in relation to their male counterparts, who draw their power from the traditional role of mothers (Hansen, 1988). Hansen argues that between two extreme paradigms — the paradigm of powerful goddesses and the chaste wife model — lies the *Virangana* paradigm, which talks about women who embody bravery, martial power, and are capable rulers (Hansen, 1988). According to Hansen, the *Virangana* model is a 'paradox' (Hansen, 1988, p. WS26) and an opposition to the normative models set for women among high-caste Hindus, as it involves rejecting Sati[36], widowhood, and traditional roles set for women (Hansen, 1988). She highlights the case of Ahilyabai, Queen of Jhansi, and Razia Sultana (Hansen, 1988). Hansen argues that the *Virangana* narrative was later altered by the Hindutva project, which co-opted figures like Ahilyabai, Queen of Jhansi, as role models for women but reinterpreted them in ways that would not transgress gender norms or challenge men's power (Hansen, 1988).

Expanding on this point, Manisha Sethi (2002), in her article, “Avenging Angels and Nurturing Mothers: Women in Hindu Nationalism,” critically examines the models used by Rashtra Sevika Samiti and Durga Vahini to train women. The central argument lies in exploring the imagery of goddess and historical figures, co-opted by Hindu nationalist women’s organisations, in making women “avenging angels” (Sethi, 2002, p. 1545) for achieving the political goals, and when the crisis is over, they return to being the “nurturing mothers” (Sethi, 2002, p. 1545). Sethi explores the concept

[34] Anasuya is the wife of the great sage of Hindu mythology, Sage Atri. She is known for her devotion and chastity, who gave birth to the Hindu Trinity of gods, Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva (Cush et al., 2008, p. 34). See Cush, D., Robinson, C., & York, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi-org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/10.4324/9780203862032 for more information.

[35] Sati has multiple meanings. Here, it means devoted wife (Cush et al., 2008, p. 771).

[36] Sati also connotes the act of self-immolation.

of “Nari Shakti” (Sethi, 2002, p. 1550), which refers to women’s power, as envisioned by Hindu nationalist groups (Sethi, 2002). The Hindutva groups view it as an inherent aspect of the Hindu religion and culture (Sethi, 2002, p. 1550). Hindutva’s concept of women’s power differs from the concept of “nari mukti” (Sethi, 2002, p. 1550), which refers to women’s freedom (Sethi, 2002). The author argues that the various models employed by Hindutva women’s groups, including the warrior goddess imagery, are designed to convey the essential qualities necessary for being an active agent in the Hindu nationalist movement (Sethi, 2002). The *Virangana* model was co-opted through figures like Rani Lakshmibai and Ahilyabai. The warrior and *Virangana* model did not reduce the importance of mothers and wives (Sethi, 2002). Instead, Sethi argues that the traditional model of wives and mothers is the foundation of women’s role in Hindutva politics (Sethi, 2002). The *Virangana* model is there to make women self-reliant and powerful, who can pose a threat to the Muslim men (Sethi, 2002). Women’s role as *Viranganas* in Hindutva politics is to ignite in Hindu men courage and restore their masculinity, enabling them to fight the Muslims (Sethi, 2002, p. 1548). The focus of these models is to empower women, but in “socially acceptable ways” (Sethi, 2002, p. 1551).

Women’s roles in Hindutva politics reveal a contradiction between using goddesses as powerful models and the ongoing structural subordination of women. While goddesses offer various avenues for women to engage with Hindutva politics, their use within Hindutva organizations reflects a casteist, classist, and Brahminical view of Hindu womanhood. Their presence tells a story of empowerment, but in a broader context, this empowerment serves only the goals of Hindutva. Scholars such as Nandita Dhawan (2017), Syed Hussain Shaheed SHS Soherwordi (2013), and K. Chanderdeep Singh (2016) warn against interpreting the presence of goddesses in Hindutva discourse as a sign of women’s empowerment. Instead, they describe how Hindutva politics co-opts feminist language and agency while simultaneously maintaining gender and caste hierarchies and exerting control over women’s bodies.

Dhawan (2017), in "From 'fire-brand' to 'water-brand': The caste politics of Uma Bharati," examines the issue of caste and gender in women's participation in Hindutva organizations through a detailed study of Uma Bharti, a female Hindutva political leader from a low-caste background. Although not directly related to the question of empowerment, the author discusses how Uma Bharti's caste was appropriated and her image as a *sanyasi* (ascetic) was utilized by Hindutva political leaders to achieve their political objectives. Dhawan discusses the appropriation of feminist language by Hindutva political leaders (Dhawan, 2017). The author argues that, although Western ideas and feminist models of empowerment are not encouraged in the Hindutva project, the Hindutva women's organizations emulate feminist language and ideas to mobilize women (Dhawan, 2017). Dhawan (2017) cites Jaffrelot's argument on the "strategy of stigmatisation and emulation of 'threatening Others'" (Jaffrelot, 2016, p. 18; Dhawan, 2017, p. 500) where Jaffrelot argues that Hindutva thinkers like Golwalkar, although criticized Western civilization and models as a "semi-barbaric life" (Jaffrelot, 2016, p. 18; Golwalkar, 1939, p. 4), Hindutva discourse followed Western concept of nationalism (Jaffrelot, 2016, p. 19). Similarly, although Hindutva groups 'demonized' (Dhawan, 2017, p. 506) feminism, they co-opt feminist ideas in reference to women's role within the Hindutva project (Dhawan, 2017).

Soherwordi (2013), in the article "Hindu Nationalism and the Political role of Hindu Women: Ideology as a Factor", addresses the issues of empowerment, gender, and the implications of the ideal role model images on Hindu women arguing that the relationship between women activists and Hindutva's religious politics is not only 'paradoxical' (Soherwordi, 2013, p.1) but complicated in the sense that although it open the space for women to play a significant role in Hindutva movement, it has a negative impact on their autonomy (Soherwordi, 2013). Singh (2016) advances this argument in his article, "In the Service of Nationalism: Women in the Hindu Nationalist Paradigm," by analyzing women's militant activism in Hindu nationalist campaigns. Singh notes that the honor of the Hindu nation is tied to the honor of Hindu women in Hindu nationalist thought (Singh, 2016). A woman is

the “flag bearer” (Singh, 2016, p. 493) of modesty, chastity, and honor both in terms of family and nation (Singh, 2016). They are also referred to as ‘matrishakti’ (Singh, 2016, p. 493), meaning the power of the mother, which represents them as both martyrs and champions of the Hindu nation (Singh, 2016). Women in Hindutva politics continue to play a dual role where, at one point, they are seen as victims of rape by Muslim men, such as in the Indian partition history, and then comes the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, where they are ‘aggressive’ (Singh, 2016, p. 512), front-runners of the campaigns. This duality in roles and imagery of women in Hindutva discourse is based on how Hindutva ideology wants its women to behave in different circumstances. It has less to do with women’s autonomy and more to do with fulfilling the political agenda of Hindu nationalism.

SECTION 2.4 HINDU GODDESSES

While Hindutva discourse portrays a stereotypical, homogeneous, and Brahmanical view of Hindu goddesses, the broader tradition of goddess worship in India conveys a complex, rich, and diverse array of regional variations. Scholars such as David Kinsley (1987), John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (1996), Kumkum Chatterjee (2013), and Tracy Pintchman (1994) emphasize the diverse portrayals of Hindu goddesses, which include both terrifying and benevolent aspects as well as the rich regional worship traditions in India. David Kinsley (1987) in *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, discusses well-known figures such as Durga, Kali, and Lakshmi, and also explores goddesses mentioned in Vedic literature (Kinsley, 1987). He refers to the 6th-century classical text *Devi Mahatmya*, a text on goddess tradition in India, to explore the origin and myths associated with the goddess Durga, Kali, and other female deities (Kinsley, 1987). Kinsley described the goddess Durga as an all-powerful, superior deity over other male gods, who rescues the universe from the demons that male gods fail to defeat (Kinsley, 1987). Kinsley (1987) consistently highlights the independent nature of the goddesses in India, who are not defined by their male deities, considering how scriptures like the *Devi Mahatmya* define and establish the goddesses.

The goddesses in Hinduism come out as figures that challenge traditional gender notions (Kinsley, 1987). The figure of Kali stands out in terms of her appearance, as she is depicted wearing skulls and killing demons (Kinsley, 1987). Kinsley (1987) also discusses the *Mahavidyas,* also known as the *Dasamahavidyas,* which comprise ten goddesses, including Kali, Chinnamasta, Tara, Dhumavati, Kamala, Bhairavi, Bagala, Bhuvanesvari, Matangi, and Sodasi. The origin of these goddesses is the story of Sati (Siva's wife), who takes many forms out of anger towards her father, Daksa, who insults Siva for his wild appearance (Kinsley, 1987). These forms are the ten *Mahavidyas,* which include both fierce forms, such as Chinnamasta, and Kamala, a calmer form (Kinsley, 1987). Kinsley (1987) also includes in his discussion a detailed examination of village and regional goddesses, where he discusses the importance of Manasa, the snake goddess, including her cults, practices, myths, and significance.

Highlighting both regional and mainstream goddess figures, John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (1996) take it further in their book, *Devi: Goddesses of India*, by presenting a compelling collection of essays on goddesses of different origins, forms, myths, and histories. Starting from Vindhyavasini[37], the goddess Ganges, to mainstream goddesses like Kali, and a political figure of Bharat Mata, the authors explore the contrasting nature of the goddesses (Hawley & Wulff, 1996). The authors point to one, a set of goddesses who are imagined as independent figures, and two, goddesses who are complete opposites and worshipped as consorts of male gods (Hawley & Wulff, 1996, p. 9). In the first half of the independent goddesses, there is the concept of *Devi*, the divine feminine, and then Vindhyavasini, who is a local goddess figure. These goddesses, the author argues, enjoy supremacy over "animal, human, or divine" (Hawley & Wulff, 1996, p.9). Then there is the idea of Sri or Lakshmi and Radha, the lover of Lord Krishna[38], whose characters are defined by the role they play

[37] Refers to the goddess who resides in the Vindhyachal mountains, India.

[38] Krishna is another form of Vishnu.

as consorts (Hawley & Wulff, 1996). The authors mention that between these lies Kali, who is supreme, transcendental, and does not belong to any other category above (Hawley & Wulff, 1996).

While both Kinsley (1987) and Hawley and Wulff (1996) highlight the goddesses as plural, regional, diverse, with some goddess forms as transgressive, Kumkum Chatterjee (2013), in her article, "Goddess encounters: Mughals, Monsters and the Goddess in Bengal," extensively discusses the goddess worship culture in Bengal, revealing its non-Brahmanical origin. Although the primary focus is on the depiction of Mughal rule from the 16th to the 18th centuries in *Mangal Kavya*[39] narratives, Chatterjee (2013) offers an in-depth insight into the evolution of goddesses, starting from their development in the 5th and 6th centuries CE and again during the 15th and 16th centuries CE, an era that saw the rise of the Mughals in Bengal (Chatterjee, 2013). The author discussed the concept of 'Vaishnavization' (Chatterjee, 2013, p. 1441) of the local goddess in Bengal, which emphasized the goddesses' roles as wives, mothers, and daughters. This is particularly notable in the transformation of the figure of Kali from fierce to a benevolent figure. The author states that the people who worshipped goddesses belonged to the marginal population who were outside the Brahmanical tradition (Chatterjee, 2013).

Expanding on the non-Brahmanical aspect of the Hindu goddess tradition, Tracy Pintchman (1994), in her book, *The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition*, traces the origin and evolution of the Great Goddess, or Mahadevi, in the Brahmanical tradition, based on the concepts of shakti, prakrti, and maya[40]. Pintchman (1994) argues that the development of the Great Goddess, like that of any other Hindu deity, is the outcome of the convergence of Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical traditions

[39] Mangal Kavyas is a collection of religious and mythological poems and stories in medieval Bengali literature on gods and goddesses.

[40] Shakti is strength or power (Cush et al., 2008, p. 725). Prakrti or Prakriti is "original nature" (Cush et al., 2008, p. 624), Maya is 'illusion' (Cush et al., 2008, p.496). See Cush, D., Robinson, C., & York, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi-org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/10.4324/9780203862032 for more information.

(Pintchman,1994). Pintchman argues that the tales and origins of the multiple goddesses are not "Vedic-Brahmanical" (Pintchman, 1994, p. 16) but were instead adopted from both the Vedas and orthodox Brahmanical sources (Pintchman, 1994). The author argues in the book that the development of the Great Goddess is related to the "Brahmanical hegemony" (Pintchman, 1994, p.17). The Brahmanical tradition, to maintain its hegemony and societal reach, had to incorporate the goddesses (Pintchman, 1994). Brahmanical Hinduism was able to sustain its hegemony in the Hindu religious tradition through its adaptations to the changing needs of the population (Pintchman, 1994).

Building on extensive research on goddess diversity in India, scholars like Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1998) and Alf Hiltebeitel and K.M. Erndl (2000) explore, through a feminist lens, how goddesses both empower and confine women. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1998) in "Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?" shows how the goddesses have been appropriated by Indian feminists and political parties, both secular and rightist, as a "symbolic resource" (Rajan, 1998, p. WS34). By feminist, Rajan meant "pro-woman" or "empowering women" (Rajan, 1998, p. WS34). She pointed to Hinduism as the sole religion with a long-standing history of goddess worship, noting that goddesses are also worshipped by lower-caste, indigenous, and non-Hindu communities (Rajan, 1998). The author notes the multiplicity in goddess forms, traditions, and ritual practices that cannot be understood through a single homogenized figure of the Hindu goddess (Rajan, 1998).

From a feminist perspective, Rajan (1998) noted that goddesses have been used at various times to convey a symbolic representation of women. During the nationalist period in the 19th century, the Indian freedom movement created an image of "militant goddess" (Rajan, 1998, p. WS36) to build an idea of women as courageous and brave (Rajan, 1998). The motive was to attract women to the nationalist struggle through symbols of Bharat Mata (Mother India) (Rajan, 1998). Later in the recent context under Hindutva nationalist organisations, this same goddess is reinterpreted to create violent female leaders who are supposed to emulate the goddess's powers. Then, in the 1970s, Indian feminists

endorsed the concept of women's power through figures such as Kali and Durga, who are non-conformist goddess figures (Rajan, 1998, WS36). Referring to Gail Omvedt's (1993) problem of the "framework of stri-shakti" (Rajan, 1998, p. WS37), where Omvedt argues that Hindu nationalists have incorporated this framework to create violent militant women leaders like Sadhvi Rithambara and Uma Bharti, Rajan argues that the majoritarian politics in India using goddesses is not the only problematic aspect. The problem also lies in the upper-caste representation of goddesses, which can 'alienate' other minority women (Rajan, 1998, p. WS37).

Alf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen M. Erndl (2000) in their book, *Is the Goddess a Feminist? The Politics of South Asian Goddesses* explores the relationship between powerful female deities in Hinduism and feminist perspectives. The authors shed light on the appropriation of the concept of shakti*,* or power, by Indian feminists and its implications for women's lives, exploring more deeply the politics of feminists' interpretations of concepts and images, as well as their ideas of shakti (Hiltebeitel & Erndl, 2000). In the book chapter, "Is Shakti Empowering for Women? Reflections on Feminism and the Hindu Goddess" (2000), Erndl argues that there is a connection between shakti and the lives of Hindu women, as well as a connection between shakti and Indian feminists (Erndl, 2000, p. 92). Her interviews with Indian feminists, activists, dancers, and artists who have appropriated the concept of shakti show how the women spoke of goddesses spiritually and as a representation of women's empowerment and power (Erndl, 2000). Both authors examine goddesses through a critical lens, exploring the concept of power, their depiction, patriarchal practices, and classical texts, such as the *Devi Mahatmya,* on goddess worship.

While the above scholarly literature offers a feminist perspective on the broader idea of Hindu goddesses, scholars such as Sanjukta Gupta (2003) and June McDaniel (2023) concentrate on Kali and Durga, highlighting the non-conformist and transgressive aspects in both the goddess figures. Sanjukta Gupta (2003), in the chapter "The Domestication of a Goddess: Carana-tirtha Kalighat, the Mahapitha

of Kali," examines the Kalighat temple in Kolkata, West Bengal, India, a notable pilgrimage site devoted to goddess Kali. While the main focus of her chapter is on the blending of Sakta and Vaishnava traditions, Gupta also addresses the idea of Kali, emphasizing the contradictions, ambiguities, and complexities surrounding Kali's image (Gupta, 2003). Additionally, she describes the temple's architecture, which includes shrines dedicated to the regional goddesses Manasa and Sitala (Gupta, 2003). The author points to Kali's "demonic ferocity and cannibalism" (Gupta, 2003, p.61) that can be seen in Kali's appearance with skulls and human heads as ornaments (Gupta, 2003). She represents death, yet she also brings life (Gupta, 2003). She is the mother who nourishes the world and offers life to all the creatures of Earth (Gupta, 2003). Gupta argues that the goddess Kali in Bengal is worshipped for her maternal qualities in Kalighat. She is viewed as a source of power and blessing in Bengal's religious tradition (Gupta, 2003). Kali's wild, untamed nature was domesticated within the Vaishnava tradition, where the goddess is transformed into a "youthful mother" (Gupta, 2003, p. 65) for her devotees. She also mentions the arrival of Ramprasad Sen's[41] songs, which glorified the motherly aspect of the goddess Kali, making her a most beloved figure in every Bengali household (Gupta, 2003).

June McDaniel (2023), in the book chapter "Fierce Goddesses of India: Durga and Kali," traces the origin story of Durga in the 6th-century CE text *Devi Mahatmya* of the *Markandeya Purana*. McDaniel (2023) notes that Durga is often depicted as a warrior figure who slays demons, negative energy, and all that is evil. She is renowned for her exceptional battle skills and courage (McDaniel, 2023). She reigns on the battlefield (McDaniel, 2023). She is depicted in *Devi Mahatmya* as the creator, the supreme "Prakriti" (McDaniel, 2023, p. 415), and the source of knowledge, from which

[41] Ramprasad Sen was a renowned Sakta devotee of goddess Kali in Bengal, famous for his devotional songs dedicated to the goddess. His genre of music is known as Shyama Sangeet (Dasgupta, 1997, p.1), which is still played today during Kali festivals in Bengal. See Dasgupta, S. (1997). Shakta Padavali and Its Contribution to the Music of Bengal. *Journal of the Indian Musicological Society, 28*(1), 1-35. https://login.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/shakta-padavali-contribution-music-bengal/docview/1307471443/se-2 for more information.

other goddesses, including Kali, the Matrikas, and various figures, emanate (McDaniel, 2023). However, Kali is a contrasting image of Durga, who is a complex deity. She is popular among Sakta practitioners and *yoginis* (ascetics) (McDaniel, 2023). She is associated with death, destruction, and rebirth (McDaniel, 2023). When Durga is seen in association with war and killing evil, Kali's worship is not about the good vs evil dichotomy (McDaniel, 2023). Kali is not worshiped by those who are 'virtuous' (McDaniel, 2023, p. 426). She is what McDaniel calls an "individualistic goddess" (McDaniel, 2023, p. 426), whose rituals are more personal, complex, and cannot be categorized as merely good or evil (McDaniel, 2023). The above body of literature conveys the conflicting aspects in the understanding of Hindu goddesses, pointing to the regional, fierce, and paradoxical nature of the divine feminine. It highlights the presence of multiple variations in the goddess tradition in India that stand against the uniform and monolithic portrayal of the goddess in the Hindutva framework, which I explore in my research.

SECTION 2.5 DEVI MAHATMYA

As an authoritative work on the goddess tradition in India, the *Devi Mahatmya* offers a challenging and conflicting view of the divine feminine, questioning the passive, obedient mother or warrior goddess archetypes in Hindutva discourse. The text focuses on the goddess not as a consort but as an autonomous deity who is capable of protecting, creating, and destroying the universe. One of the eminent studies on *Devi Mahatmya* is F. Eden Pargiter's (1904) translation of the Sanskrit *Devi Mahatmya* into English, titled *The Markandeya Purana*. In his translation of the *Markandeya purana* (or Mark P), Pargiter (1904) provides in the introduction a detailed understanding of the structure of the text where he presents the five parts of the Mark P divided into Cantos from 1 to 137th that includes the conclusion of the text, Mark P. Pargiter notes that Canto 82 to 92 is the *Devi Mahatmya* component of Mark P that deals with the goddess tradition in India (Pargiter, 1904, p. iv). Pargiter notes that *Devi Mahatmya* is a "later interpolation" (Pargiter, 1904, p. vi), which is like a poem and can be treated as

a completely separate text. He provides an overview of the text, stating that it begins with the glorification of the goddess Mahamaya and then revolves around stories and descriptions of battle scenes between the goddess and demons (Pargiter, 1904, p. vi).

Like Pargiter (1904), Thomas Coburn (1984; 1992) points to the significance of the text as a rich source of goddess tradition in India. In his book *Devi-Mahatmya: The Crystallization of the Goddess Tradition*, Coburn (1984) notes that *Devi Mahatmya* is a well-established source of the goddess worship tradition in India, providing the first comprehensive understanding of the divine feminine in the Sanskrit language (Coburn, 1984). Coburn (1992), in *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devi-Mahatmya and A Study of its Interpretation*, moves beyond merely offering a translation of the text, originally written in Sanskrit, into English. Coburn explores the names of the goddess, describing how the *Devi Mahatmya* presents an "integrative vision of the goddess" (Coburn, 1992, p. 18) through the names, descriptions, and features associated with each goddess figure. Coburn (1992) identifies the popularity of the text, *Devi Mahatmya,* in present times, especially in the spiritual realm of the Tantric tradition that revolves around goddesses. He also notes the religious significance of the text as an authoritative scripture in the goddess tradition and its recitation within that tradition (Coburn, 1992).

While the above works highlight the importance of the text *Devi Mahatmya*, David Kinsley (1978), Thomas Coburn (1996), and C.A. Humes (2000) offer a detailed analysis of the goddess's representation in the text, positioning her as both immanent and universal. Kinsley (1978) in "The Portrait of the Goddess in the Devi-mahatmya," captures the multifaceted nature of the divine feminine and explores the warrior imagery, the Matrikas (Mothers), and the ambivalence in the goddess imagery. Kinsley (1978) explains that the multiple names of the goddess in the text imply the different goddess traditions, cults, and myths associated with the goddess figure (Kinsley, 1978). The author argues that *Devi Mahatmya* does not try to tame the unruly side of the goddess (Kinsley, 1978). Instead,

it glorifies the terrible, complex, fierce nature of the goddesses through figures like Kali, Camunda, and Candika (Kinsley, 1978, p. 493). He points to the text's inclusion of village or regional goddesses through the depiction of the Matrikas or Mothers (Kinsley, 1978). Kinsley (1978) notes that *Devi Mahatmya* situates the goddess as an independent deity who possesses both positive and negative qualities. She emerges as a transcendent figure who holds cosmic supremacy over all other male Hindu deities (Kinsley, 1978).

Thomas Coburn (1996), in the book chapter, "Devi: The Great Goddess", notes that the description of the goddess as Mahamaya in *Devi Mahatmya* is similar to the Upanishad, which discusses the "mystical knowledge of ultimate truth" (Coburn, 1996, p. 33). He goes on explaining the concept of Mahamaya*,* which means "great illusion" (Coburn, 1996, p. 33). Coburn examines the word 'Maya', stating that it refers to "magic power" (Coburn, 1996, p. 33), an idea associated with the demons who possess such power. When the text describes the goddess as Mahamaya, it also situates her as the 'demoness' (Coburn, 1996, p. 33). The text portrays the goddess as one who transcends the distinction between good and evil, as she is also described as a fierce, merciless, and bloodthirsty goddess. She is the only reality and truth, and no one can match such power (Coburn, 1996, pp. 31–33). The author describes the Matrikas as different shaktis or energies of the one great goddess (Coburn, 1996, p. 38). Coburn also notes how the goddess's representation in the text conveys her "non-Aryan" (Coburn, 1996, p. 40) origin, as she is described as dwelling in mountains, inhabiting remote places, drinking blood, and consuming meat (Coburn, 1996).

Expanding on the non-conformist portrayal of the goddess and the regional variations in *Devi Mahatmya*, Humes's (2000) study further analyzes the text from a feminist lens, examining its relevance. Humes's (2000) book chapter, "Is the Devi Mahatmya a Feminist scripture?" highlights the role of the text in contemporary Hindu goddess worship in India. Humes (2000) conducted fieldwork in Vindhyachal, North India, to examine the relevance of the goddess Vindhyavasini and make a

comparative study of the goddess Vindhyavasini and ordinary women (Humes, 2000, p. 123). Humes explores the issue of women's empowerment and liberation by examining *Devi Mahatmya* (Humes, 2000). Her study focuses on the interpretation of *Devi Mahatmya* by women respondents, who engage with the text in their daily lives through their work. As a puranic text, Humes (2000) concludes that *Devi Mahatmya* can be feminist if interpreted in ways that could challenge male-dominated ideas of social roles (Humes, 2000, p. 149).

While Humes (2000) offers a feminist interpretation of the text, Karline McLain (2008) presents a contrasting view, suggesting that *Devi Mahatmya* can be reinterpreted in ways that are not empowering for women. Karline McLain (2008) examines in her article, "Holy superheroine: a comic book interpretation of the Hindu Devi Mahatmya scripture," *Tales of Durga* (1978), one of the comic books in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series (Immortal Picture Stories) (McLain, 2008, p. 298). Through her content analysis of the comic book, the author critically examines the evolving imagery of Durga in contemporary times and the series' adaptation of the goddess representations to cater to the needs of its middle-class, upper-caste audience (McLain, 2008). *Amar Chitra Katha* (1967) by Anant Pai is an "English-language series" (McLain, 2008, p. 298) that includes a collection of storybooks on Indian (mainly Hindu) figures, both mythological and historical. In the comic book, *Tales of Durga*, McLain argues that although Durga's image is adapted from the classical text *Devi Mahatmya*, her independent and powerful depiction in *Devi Mahatmya* did not align with the ideal heroine model (McLain, 2008). McLain (2008) states that the image of the goddess Durga in the comic book is tamed and softened, not depicting her authentically as she appears in the *Devi Mahatmya*. Kali in the comic book does not appear as a wild, ferocious figure, nor does Durga appear as a "dominating warrior" (McLain, 2008, p. 317). McLain (2008) argues that the series presents a subdued image of the goddesses, although it claims not to alter the original depiction in *Devi Mahatmya.* However, in retelling the story of Durga, the makers of the comic book series reconfigured the depiction of the goddess, erasing the immense power of Durga (McLain, 2008, p. 320).

The above discussion presented by both Humes (2000) and McLain (2008) shows how *Devi Mahatmya* is a vital text for feminist critique, as it offers tools of subversion of patriarchy, but also risks being reinterpreted to support the domestication of goddesses. Unlike the Hindu nationalist portrayal of goddesses as symbols of purity and submission, *Devi Mahatmya* depicts goddesses who fight for cosmic justice and are a supreme deity. She is not a nationalist symbol or an ideal model of Hindu womanhood who can be contained. This opens up possibilities for intersectional feminist interpretation of the text that presents a diverse range of goddess imagery, which challenges the majoritarian religious nationalism of Hindutva ideology that categorizes goddesses as either mother or warrior figures. From a feminist perspective, *Devi Mahatmya* has the potential to serve as a counter-hegemonic narrative, establishing goddesses as plural, ambiguous, and complex.

CONCLUSION

To date, numerous writings have been published on the goddess tradition, *Devi Mahatmya*, Hindutva discourse, and the roles of women in Hindu nationalism. However, a significant gap remains in the nuanced analysis of the goddess imagery through an intersectional feminist framework, which I directly undertake in my research. This study employs an intersectional feminist framework in analyzing goddess representations across distinct yet interconnected spheres: the textual interpretation present in *Devi Mahatmya*, the symbolic imaginations of goddesses on the websites of Hindu Right organizations, and the lived experiences of goddesses in the oral narrative of ordinary Hindu women. Humes's (2000) work on *Devi Mahatmya* through a feminist lens did not specifically focus on the intersectional understanding of the goddess imagery in the text. Humes (2000) also did not contextualise the representation within Hindutva politics' appropriation of mainstream Hindu goddess figures, a crucial point that I address in this research.

My research includes the goddess imagery present in the lived experiences of Hindu women from West Bengal, whose narratives have not been explored extensively previously, providing a framework of understanding Hindu nationalism and its politics of appropriation from the standpoint of ordinary women. By adopting an intersectional approach, my research reveals how Brahmanical patriarchy, caste, and power operate through Hindutva's model of goddesses. In the next chapter, I discuss the methodology, feminist oral history practice, and the methods I employed to address my research objective.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I discussed the theoretical framework I used to analyze the imagery of goddesses in *Devi Mahatmya*, Hindutva representations, and the lived experiences of ordinary Hindu women. Additionally, I examined the existing literature on goddess imagery, Hindu nationalism, and *Devi Mahatmya*, highlighting the gap in current research and discussing how my study differs from the previous body of literature on Hindu goddesses, Hindu nationalism, and *Devi Mahatmya*. In this chapter, I outline the methodology and the methods I used to address the research questions and objectives. The aim is to explore goddess representations not only in textual sources and mainstream political narratives but also in the contemporary oral narratives of Hindu women, whose perspectives are rarely reflected in the dominant narrative of goddesses under Hindu nationalist politics.

The chapter begins with a detailed examination of the research methodology used to include Hindu women's oral accounts. I highlight the significance of oral sources as vital tools for amplifying voices that are often silenced or marginalized. Additionally, I mention the textual analysis of goddess imagery in *Devi Mahatmya* and Hindutva representations, along with the sources examined to fulfill the study's main objectives. In a dedicated methods section, I outline the sample characteristics, locations involved, share my fieldwork experiences, and discuss the limitations of my research, especially concerning the sample characteristics and interview method.

FEMINIST PRACTICE OF ORAL HISTORY

The methodological rubric used in documenting women's oral narratives of goddesses is the feminist practice of oral history. Using this methodology, I was able to include women's perspectives on the goddesses that are missing from Hindutva's portrayal, revealing different ways in which Hindu women remember and interpret these figures. I first discuss the importance of oral history before exploring the feminist approach to oral history. I also highlight how the feminist practice differs from the traditional methodology of oral history.

Oral history as a methodology provides the opportunity to include women's experiences in their own words (Gluck &Patai, 1991). The methodology enables the capture of stories of people and their memories, which are often absent from traditional history writing (Thompson, 2015, pp. 35-36). It offers a broader scope for doing in-depth interviews, life history research, and narrative research. Paul Thompson points out that the advantage of practicing oral history is not limited to introducing new ways of writing history, but can lead to radical change by incorporating underrepresented sections of society into the making of history (Thompson, 2015, pp. 36-39). Alessandro Portelli (2015) states that the usefulness of oral history is in exploring the lives of 'nonhegemonic' (Portelli, 2015, p. 52) groups, pointing to the importance given to the speaker's feelings, thoughts, and perspective on historical events (Portelli, 2015, p. 52). As a methodology, oral history is connected to "history from below" (Mahajan, 2011, p. 282). It gives attention to the “speaker's subjectivity” (Portelli, 2015, p. 52) and voices that have been absent in traditional history writing (Gluck & Patai, 1991). The focus on subjectivity not only helps in analyzing the complex interplay of caste, class, ethnicity, and gender in goddess representations but also highlights the plurality in goddess representations, present in women’s understanding of goddesses. The emphasis on subjectivity helps in identifying empowerment and patriarchy in the imaginings of the divine feminine. The aspect of subjectivity also provides

insights into how ordinary Hindu women negotiate and resist the symbolic imagery of goddesses in Hindutva discourse and the unique ways in which women remember goddesses

Feminists have realized that oral history interviews with women produce "new insights about women's experiences of themselves in their worlds" (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 11). The aim was to uncover women's words, experiences, perspectives, and thoughts, often missing in situations where such ideas oppose the dominant concepts and values established by men (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 11). Joan Sangster (1994) notes that feminists incorporated oral history methodology because traditional sources often overlooked women's lives and stories, and oral history provided an opportunity to situate their voices at the center, thereby challenging the dominant knowledge-building process (Sangster, 1994, pp. 5-6). However, feminist oral history practice differed from traditional ways of doing oral history, as conventional ways of making oral history could not address the idea that the "personal is political" (Gluck & Patai, 1991, p. 1; Fobear, 2016, p. 63). Feminist oral history practice focuses on women's narratives, which serves as an empowering act for women (Fobear, 2016, p. 63).

Postmodernist and postcolonial theory in the 1980s altered how feminists approached oral history (Armitage, 2012, p. 175). Two major interventions took place; first, the emphasis was placed on the complicated relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee (Armitage, 2012, p. 175). Second, the focus was given to the multiple forms of oppression based on differential realities of class, race, and gender, breaking the unified notion of women as a universal category (Armitage, 2012, p. 175). Asian, Latina, black, and other women of colour, including “Indigenous and non-Western feminists”, challenged Western, white, and middle-class feminists’ universal notion of gender, women as a monolithic category, and ideas of ‘marginality’ (Fobear, 2016, p. 63). There was an increasing awareness among feminist oral historians of the “plurality of women’s lived experiences” (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 16). Patricia Hill Collins’ ideas of the “matrix of domination” (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p.

16; Collins, 2000, p. 18) implied the interlocking systems of oppression based on the differences and the necessity to recognize experiences from the standpoint of black or coloured women, which can help in producing a complete knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 16). It was marked by rethinking the definition of marginal, which is not a monolithic, uniform concept (Fobear, 2016, p. 63).

Feminist oral history practice supports intersectional feminist analysis, as it emphasizes differential experiences and considers various social factors that contribute to creating these experiences. Jennifer Scanlon points to the shift in feminist oral history practice from conducting research on marginalized women to engaging with women (Scanlon, 1993, p. 639). Katherine Fobear notes that feminist oral historians revised their interview technique from a one-sided interview process to a more interactive interview process based on dialogue (Fobear, 2016, p. 63). Feminist oral history practice forms a knowledge base that recognizes women's everyday lives and experiences as a source of knowledge and as necessary to document (Fobear, 2016; Armitage, 2012). The importance of women's experiences and of the intersecting social identities in feminist oral history is central to my analysis, as my research focuses on women's experiences of the divine feminine. Doing feminist oral history helps capture how different social factors, such as gender, caste, ethnicity, region, religion, and class, influence women's perceptions of goddesses.

Sherna Berger Gluck (2011) critically examines the body of literature produced by feminists themselves on women's lived experiences. Gluck argues that, although oral history played a significant role in feminist ways of researching women, much of the research by feminist oral historians earlier did not critically examine the complexity of women's lived experiences (Gluck, 2011, p. 65). Women's oral history works challenged patriarchy by emphasizing women's agency, subjectivity, and empowerment issues, but left behind a complex discussion on race and class privileges (Gluck, 2011, p. 65). In the global context, women's experiences vary based on geographical and cultural settings (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 17). Their experiences might be impacted by the history of colonialism,

political turmoil, and economic and social issues (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 17). All this discussion on feminist oral history practice brought more attention to the social identities that come into play when researching women's lived experiences. The women I interviewed in my research belonged to various social settings where cultural, social, political, and economic aspects influenced their perception of goddesses, along with other factors like gender, caste, age, ethnicity, and class identities. Notably, the geographical location of West Bengal, with its rich history of goddess worship and festivals, has a significant influence on women's perspectives and beliefs about goddesses.

As a methodology, the feminist practice of oral history brings into discussion the need for an intersectional lens and ways of unlearning the process of doing research with women and marginalized communities. The most significant aspect of feminist oral history research continues to be documenting the lives and experiences of women who are missing from history (Armitage, 2012, p. 179). In my research, this involves ordinary women's voices, stories, and interpretations of goddesses, which are absent from the mainstream political narratives of goddesses under Hindu nationalism. According to Scanlon, oral history has successfully provided a scope for 'recording' women's stories and experiences (Scanlon, 1993, p. 639). However, feminist oral historians argue that not every oral history research involving women is a "feminist act" nor is it "inherently feminist" (Geiger, 1990, p. 169). The purpose of feminist oral history practice is to continue centering the voices of women who have been historically, socially, and politically overlooked, and giving attention to women's stories, life narratives, and lived experiences.

I want to emphasize the significance of oral sources, as they play a major role in my research. Oral narratives and stories carry a socio-political meaning that speaks about the diverse experiences of people based on caste, class, race, ethnicity, and belief systems. Oral sources help bring to light the experiences of marginal communities or groups, unlike written accounts or records, which are often written from the perspective of power and by those who are powerful. Furthermore, stories contain

actions and events that are considered memorable and inform people "who we were-and were not-and why that identity was valuable" (Frank, 2002, p. 110). "Narratability means that events and lives are affirmed as being worth telling and thus worth living" (Frank, 2002, p.111). In my study, narratives are central as it is through narratives that my research explores diverse imageries of goddesses present in ordinary women's oral accounts and captures women's resistance, negotiation, and subversion as they remember goddesses.

Women's oral accounts of goddesses form a significant component of my analysis. Their lived experiences are my primary source of knowledge. I move away from traditional epistemology, where the focus is primarily on men's experiences, who are considered 'knower' (Harding, 1987, p. 3). According to feminist scholars, traditional epistemology excludes the fact that women can be "knowers or agents of knowledge" (Harding, 1987, p. 3). In my research, women are the knowers. Based on their perception of goddesses, I show the plurality in the divine feminine imagination. Sandra Harding notes that history is written from the perspective of men or the powerful class (Harding, 1987, p. 3). Here, the dominant goddess narrative in Hindutva discourse is formulated from an upper-caste perspective and has been refashioned by men or a class of people in positions of power. The dominant narrative does not represent the multiple ways in which ordinary women remember goddesses, overlooking the variations in goddess tradition in India. Thus, my focus lies on women's voices and their experiences of the divine feminine, which offer a more nuanced representation of the goddesses. When I refer to women's experiences, I am aware that women are not a homogeneous category. Feminist methodologies stress the word "women's experiences" (Harding, 1987, p. 6) to convey the plurality in the category 'women' (Harding, 1987), and that women's experiences vary based on multiple social identities.

NOTE ON POSITIONALITY AND ETHICAL ISSUES

As a researcher, I am an urban, educated, upper-caste, middle-class Indian woman studying in a North American university. Addressing my positionality as a researcher and the ethical issues associated with oral history research is important. Susan H. Armitage (2012) talks about the problem of researchers being perceived as an 'outsider' when interviewing marginal communities (Armitage, 2012, p. 177). The issue was raised with First-world feminists' claim to "speak for" (Armitage, 2012, p. 177) all women or stand on behalf of all women (Armitage, 2012). Susan Geiger (1990) highlights the problematic representation of the Third World and the stereotypical portrayal of women in the Third World as victims by Western feminist scholars (Geiger, 1990, p. 173). The discussion raises crucial questions regarding what can be defined as marginal and who is oppressed (Fobear, 2016). According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988), some Western feminist scholars presume Third-world women as victims, which takes away the agency and subjectivity of women in the Global South and creates a "homogenous notion of the oppression" (Mohanty, 1988, p. 65). Geiger (1990) argues that a form of cultural elitism or arrogance of Western feminists (Geiger, 1990, p. 173) can be found in the assumption that women in non-Western countries are all uniform and oppressed in contrast to Western women who are liberal, empowered, and living in a capitalist, progressive world (Geiger, 1990, p. 173). Geiger notes that what is considered and assumed as marginal or oppressed by the researcher might not reflect the narrator's position (Geiger, 1990, p. 171). Instead, it reveals the researcher's predetermined notion and the power position from which the researcher defines ‘marginality’ (Geiger, 1990, p. 171).

Feminists working with women's voices globally are made aware of the complexity of giving a voice or speaking for women globally (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 17). In one such work, Daphne Patai criticized Western ideologies and U.S. feminist academicians by raising the question, "What is meant by "Third World women?" What is "ethical" research?" (Patai, 1991, p. 137). Patai argues that

inequality is embedded in Western feminist analysis; when a white, middle-class, U.S. female scholar from North America interviews poor women of colour (Patai, 1991, p. 137), the problem in doing women's oral history research becomes visible (Patai, 1991). The construction of Third-world women as victims of patriarchy points to a white savior complex that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak expressed in the sentence, "White men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 1994, p. 93). This sentence also points to the colonizer and colonized hierarchical relation. It should be remembered that a generalization of the oppression of women also overlooks how patriarchy works differently in a different global context. Caste, class, religion, race, region, and ethnicity continue to play a significant part in maintaining violence against marginal communities and women. Western feminist thinking of a collective, homogenous understanding of the patriarchal framework in Third-world countries overlooks the economic disparity between Global North and Global South countries that affects women's lives in many ways (Mohanty, 1988, pp. 63-64). Nan Alamilla Boyd highlights the importance of “de-centering and decolonizing” feminist oral history research (Boyd, 2018, p. 151). Boyd shifts the attention toward the idea of having "multiple truths" (Boyd, 2018, p. 151) and the emphasis on the speaker's subjectivity in contrast to Western epistemologies that value "scientific methods" (Boyd, 2018, p. 151) in producing knowledge (Boyd, 2018, p. 151). Boyd suggests that the importance lies not in data gathering, finding the truth, or reliability in memory, but in de-centering the research agenda towards a more profound engagement that prioritizes and cares for the narrators of the research (Boyd, 2018, p. 152).

Feminist oral history practitioners are mindful of the complex relationship between the researcher and the narrator, calling for a more ethical engagement with the narrator. Their critical analysis prompts researchers to consider whether white, Western female academics can effectively represent the voices of the marginalized. Spivak, a postcolonial feminist, raised the question, "Can the subaltern (as woman) speak?" (Spivak, 1994, p. 92). Spivak points out that the Western assumption of constructing the subject of the Third World will ultimately fuse with imperialist notions, and "the

subaltern woman will be as mute as ever" (Spivak, 1994, p. 90). The researchers must acknowledge their positionality in the interview process and be careful not to speak on behalf of all women, as if women are a universal, homogeneous category that encompasses all experiences from different parts of the world. Feminist researchers emphasized the issue of positionality to oppose the notion of the "view from nowhere" (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 21). Although the notion of positionality is significant, Patai cautions feminist researchers against using positionality to avoid issues of authority and complex hierarchical relations embedded in feminist oral history interviews (Patai, 1991, p. 149). However, it does not downplay the importance of positionality. The notion of positionality assumes greater significance when working with marginalized voices.

Given my background as a middle-class, educated Indian researcher from an urban, upper-caste family, I can be seen as an outsider who does not fully understand the various challenges women face based on their socio-economic position and caste, class, religion, and ethnicity. The challenge may lie in convincing participants to participate in the research. Cultural barriers related to ethnicity or caste can also exist. However, as a Bengali woman whose mother tongue is Bengali, born and raised in West Bengal in a middle-class, Hindu family, having a prior understanding of the cultural, religious, social, and political context necessary to conduct the interviews, I could communicate my thoughts to the women I interviewed. One of the issues I addressed before conducting the interviews was the language question in the interview process. Limiting the interview to English is a barrier for many participants. I understand that using English as the sole language of the interview could create a sense of elitism, as fluency in English is often associated with urban, educated women who have access to elite institutions. So, I made sure women could speak in their native language, Bengali, during the interviews. By allowing participants to express themselves in either English or Bengali, based on their comfort level, I aimed to create a more inclusive interview process. Additionally, I provided the consent form in Bengali, so participants could read it easily and opt to respond in Bengali during the interview if they preferred.

As I started interviewing participants, a few of them viewed me as a researcher from the Global North. They expressed skepticism regarding my understanding of Hindu culture and traditions, particularly those related to goddess worship. Some women participants thought I was unaware of Hindu rituals and religious festivals, so they explained in detail the goddess worship rituals. To address this gap, I began by sharing background information about myself and answering their questions in detail, explaining the research process, its purpose, and my role in it. During our conversation, I also shared my Bengali background, my understanding of Bengali culture, festivals, and goddess worship in Bengal, as well as my research journey in Kolkata and Rajasthan, India, while working on a Master of Philosophy thesis. Through dialogue, participants felt more comfortable before we began discussing the interview topic.

I ensured that participants felt secure and respected, giving them the space and time needed to discuss as much as possible in a single in-depth Zoom interview. Many participants spoke for hours, sharing personal stories, thoughts, and family histories of goddess worship. Several expressed interest in staying connected and reading the research once it is published. The issues I addressed, before and during the interview process, allowed participants to be at ease, creating an environment where they felt valued and willing to share their experiences openly. By incorporating women's experiences in my research, I am not claiming that I am giving a voice to the ordinary Hindu women by studying their perception of goddesses. Their stories exist. However, their stories are not represented in the current mainstream political narrative of the goddess under Hindu nationalist discourse. My research aims to amplify the voices of ordinary Hindu women, challenging the dominant goddess narrative in Hindutva politics and highlighting the multifaceted roles goddesses play in the everyday lives of ordinary women.

NOTE ON POWER IMBALANCE IN ORAL HISTORY

As a researcher doing feminist oral history research, I am aware of the power imbalance in the research process, where the researcher assumes a privileged position and is in charge of the research's methods, outcomes, and design (Kim, 2008, p. 1353). It is thus vital to practice 'self-reflexivity' to understand the politics of positionality within the research process by critically engaging with our cultural, historical, economic, political, and social location and power position in society (Kim, 2008, p. 1355). Feminist oral history researchers remain aware of their location and social background, understanding how their place and assumptions influence the research project, interview process, and narrative interpretation (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 21). A feminist oral historian willing to challenge different forms of power based on race, ethnicity, class, and gender should always question her positionality within the research project and society (Kim, 2008, p. 1356). We must listen carefully to the narrator's point of view and remain open to new findings based on the narrator's standpoint. The priority must be given to the narrator's perspective and experiences. It is essential not to view the narrator or interviewees as "raw materials" to gather knowledge and achieve research goals, but to focus on engaging with and building a relationship with the narrator, where the narrator feels heard (Tallbear, 2014, p.2). I used a semi-structured, open-ended question format in my interview guide to maintain a focus on women's words, think from their perspective, and provide women with the space to express themselves freely.

Another point to note is the question of "interpretive authority" (Borland, 1991, p. 64) in feminist oral history research. Borland notes that the solution to the problem of interpretive authority does not involve verifying the researcher's interpretations by narrators, as the author believes that feminist interpretation contextualizes the narratives within a broader political and social context (Borland, 1991, p. 73). Instead, as feminist scholars, our objective of gathering data should not be to fit into models that we believe in but to allow the "exchange of ideas" (Borland, 1991, p. 73). Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack suggests listening attentively to both "the dominant and muted channels"

(Anderson &Jack, 1991, p. 11) in women's oral accounts (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 11). Muted channels refer to thoughts that women do not speak as they do not conform to the norms or models set by men (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 11). The objective is to learn to listen to women's voices, without following predetermined notions that limit our potential as researchers to listen to those stories carefully (Anderson et al., 1987, p. 119).

Throughout the interviews, I noted the gaps, silences, and emotional expressions in the participants' oral accounts. For instance, when discussing the concept of the ideal Hindu woman in my research, some participants responded with silence. These silences conveyed a sense of dissatisfaction that could be interpreted as "muted channels" (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 11) through which women expressed their refusal to believe in such ideal models. Other participants laughed at the concept of ideal Hindu womanhood, showing their resistance to patriarchal notions. During the interviews, I also paid close attention to the everyday rituals and stories that women narrated, which helped me consider how they perceived goddesses. Their childhood stories of goddesses, passed down through generations by grandmothers and their family histories of goddess worship, played a significant role in their introduction to these deities. It is essential to understand that participants often convey their thoughts through emotions, silence, or by refraining from speaking about specific issues. Kim suggests that the concept of "speaking out" (Kim, 2008, p. 1360) in Western culture or ideology represents a negation of silence, which serves as a tool of resistance for marginalized voices (Kim, 2008, pp. 1360-1361). Silence is not the absence of words, and non-Western feminists see silence as defiance and not submission (Kim, 2008, p. 1361; Duncan, 2001). Silence should be understood in the context of its cultural and historical background, as well as the practice of silence in a particular socio-political context within the Global South (Mahajan, 2011). For instance, Sucheta Mahajan discusses the silences in describing the partition of India, noting that the "difficulties in telling" (Mahajan, 2011, p. 294) reveal a way through which narrators of partition expressed their trauma (Mahajan, 2011, p. 294).

Apart from the practice of self-reflexivity, addressing interpretive authority, and carefully listening to the narrator's perspective, feminist oral historians should acknowledge the power imbalance within oral history research and offer something more beneficial than just sharing "scholarship" (Scanlon, 1993, p. 640). Scanlon recommends a "take-and-give methodology" (Scanlon, 1993, p. 640), where feminist researchers, in return for the data, offer money or other forms of resources, such as time, which are more beneficial to the participant (Scanlon, 1993, p. 640). This methodology is understood as a step towards ethical research in feminist oral history practices, where researchers will respond to the needs of the participants in a way that will help them (Scanlon, 1993). As a feminist researcher, although I agree with the methodology, I do not have the resources or funding to offer money to the participants whom I interviewed. However, I offered other forms of resources, such as addressing their concerns, building a meaningful relationship, dedicating time, and amplifying their voices.

My research focuses on knowledge production from the perspective of ordinary women, emphasizing the knowledge embedded in their realities (Fobear, 2016, p. 66). Kim TallBear's practice of "care for the subject" (TallBear, 2014, p. 3), drawing from Donna Haraway's work on "situated knowledges" (Haraway, 1988, p. 583; TallBear, 2014, p. 3), calls for attention to the production of knowledge from the standpoint of the participants. Donna Haraway's situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988, p. 575; TallBear, 2014, p. 3) seeks to produce knowledge "from the "standpoint" of women" (TallBear, 2014, p. 3), their culture, their histories, and the structuring of the research questions from the point of view of the marginalized (TallBear, 2014, p. 3). According to Haraway (1988), the concept of situated knowledge enables the researcher to view the research from the women's perspective (Haraway, 1988, p. 583). In my study, I draw on the lived experiences and interpretations of ordinary Hindu women regarding goddesses. The focus is on their negotiations and tales of resistance to the Brahmanical patriarchal structure and Hindutva ideology. Based on their understanding of goddesses

and critique of Hindu womanhood, women's narratives serve as a framework for understanding Hindutva ideology.

METHODS

IMPORTANCE OF WEST BENGAL AS A REGION

I chose to interview women from West Bengal (referred to as Bengal) as the region is known for the rich goddess tradition, unlike any other state in India. Furthermore, the region is known for the constant presence of goddesses in the everyday lives of ordinary women. The oral stories of women from Bengal helped reveal the plurality, diversity, and different perspectives on the goddesses. For centuries, Bengal worshiped the goddess Durga, a ten-armed goddess known for slaying Mahisasur, the demon (Chatterjee, 2013, p. 1435). It is the most important five-day festival in Bengal, where Durga is worshipped as a mother, protector, daughter, and as a symbolic representation of women's power or shakti.

Goddess worship in Bengal dates back to the fifth and sixth centuries C.E. (Chatterjee, 2013). The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries C.E. mark significant points of evolution in the goddess worship tradition in Bengal, with the arrival of the Mughals (Chatterjee, 2013, pp. 1436-38). An ancient goddess tradition existed before the Vedic-Brahmanical tradition of goddess worship, which continued in regions such as Bengal and Assam (Chatterjee, 2013, p. 1438). Notable goddess figures in Bengali are Kali, Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Durga. However, Bengal is home to both mainstream and regional or local goddesses, such as Manasa, Sitala, Itu, and Bonobibi, who are worshiped equally by men and women. The regional goddesses are often worshipped by lower-caste or indigenous people, representing their traditions, identity, and culture. Bengal is also known for worshipping various forms of Kali, such as Candi and Camunda, with well-known shakti pithas or sacred sites dedicated to the

goddess Kali, where her power is revered. Interestingly, the regional deities in Bengal are as popular as mainstream goddesses for their roles and functions.

RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

I obtained ethics approval in November 2023 from the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board to conduct online interviews with women from West Bengal. I initially considered traveling to West Bengal, India, for in-person interviews, but switched to the virtual Zoom interview method during my thesis proposal stage due to limited time and financial constraints.

I started my fieldwork in December 2023 by contacting potential participants for my research study. I recruited the participants through a combination of two methods: purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling enables researchers to utilize their expertise in recruiting initial participants based on the study's purpose (Guest et al., 2017). I used purposive sampling to select initial participants who could provide rich and relevant information related to the research objective. I contacted women from West Bengal who are researchers and/or professors with expertise and knowledge of the goddess tradition in Bengal. I obtained their contact information from the websites of universities in Bengal. I reached out to them via the University of Ottawa email address to inquire about their participation in the study. When contacting the potential participants for my research, I also attached a Letter of Information (Appendix I) to provide an overview of the study. I employed the snowball sampling method to recruit the remaining participants. I asked existing participants if they knew women who might be interested in participating in my research. The existing participants shared my contact details with interested women, who then contacted me via email or phone to show their willingness to participate in the interview.

INTERVIEWS

I conducted semi-structured, in-depth Zoom interviews with 30 ordinary Hindu women from West Bengal, India. The women I interviewed were housewives, school teachers, professors, IT professionals, journalists, Reiki and spiritual healers, and social workers who were inclined towards goddess worship or had goddesses in their consciousness. Their ages ranged from 20 to 80 years, and they came from various locations, including the metropolitan city of Kolkata and the outskirts of West Bengal. Predominantly urban and middle-class, women from both upper and lower caste backgrounds in West Bengal emphasized the significance of the goddess Durga and the Durga Puja festival in the lives of Bengali residents. However, an equal number of women spoke about their detachment from religious orthodox rituals surrounding goddesses. During the interview, women discussed their work, family histories of goddess worship, gender norms, and their personal experience of goddesses. They reflected on their own situations as women from varied caste, class, economic, and ethnic backgrounds within the society. They shared their life experiences and their understanding of womanhood, based on which they also narrated their idea of goddesses.

The data for the research were obtained through semi-structured Zoom interviews. I set the interview limit at 30, as having 30 participants ensures adequate representation of women from diverse social settings. A semi-structured, virtual interview of 60 to 90 minutes each was deemed adequate to address the study's objectives. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to express their thoughts and ideas (Willis, 2011). It helps generate new questions and themes to understand the complex role of goddesses in women's everyday lives, facilitating an in-depth and detailed analysis of women's experiences. Moreover, a total of 30 interviews with women were sufficient to gather enough data to analyze and explore the varied imaginings of goddesses in women’s perspectives.

I used Zoom, a video conferencing platform, to conduct interviews with women. Zoom was the most suitable option for me to conduct the interviews. For the virtual interviews, participants were

required to have a stable internet connection. However, there was little to no cost involved in traveling to the interview location or adjusting work to be present for the interview. Moreover, because of Zoom, I was able to interview women who lived in North Bengal or in small villages or towns on the outskirts of Kolkata that are not connected to the main city.

The interview process included an Information Letter (Appendix I), sent to participants during the recruitment phase. An electronic consent form, available in both Bengali and English (Appendices II and III), was used to obtain the participants' consent prior to the interview. The consent form included all necessary information, including the purpose of the study, consent for audio and video recording, details of participation, risks, benefits, and confidentiality. The consent form included options for both verbal and written consent for participants who preferred verbal consent. Participants had the option to sign the consent form electronically or to sign, scan, and send it back via email. During the virtual interviews, with the participant's informed consent, I recorded both audio and video of the interview. However, the video recording was deleted after the interview concluded. Most of the interviews lasted approximately 1.5 hours, with some extending up to 2 hours.

I interviewed each woman participant only once, and there were no follow-up interviews. The participants decided on the interview time based on their preferences and availability. I used an interview guide (Appendix IV) to steer the conversation. The questions focused on goddess worship and perception, rituals, family history of worship, the concept of Hindu womanhood, and the goddess's political role in mainstream Indian politics. The interview questions also included basic demographic details. However, the participants' identities are kept confidential. Interview transcripts are anonymized, and participants' real names are replaced with pseudonyms. The anonymized data are used solely for this research project and related conference presentations and publications.

I moved from conducting conventional face-to-face interviews to using a video conferencing platform, Zoom, to interview women from West Bengal, India. Zoom is a flexible application that is easy to navigate for both researchers and interviewees. Sara Thunberg and Linda Arnell (2022) note that virtual interviews, utilizing technologies such as Zoom, are an alternative to in-person interviews in qualitative research and can be more cost-effective (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022, p. 761).

The use of 'digital methods' (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022, p. 757) in qualitative interviews includes chat /message interviews, email interviews, Video conferencing platforms, online surveys, or telephone interviews (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022, p. 757). Although an in-person interview is considered most favorable in qualitative research, as it allows for considering both verbal and non-verbal signs, such as body language or gestures made by participants, in many situations, it can be problematic (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022). The problems include geographical locations, distance, health issues (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022, p. 758), job constraints, time and funding constraints, and privacy concerns (Janghorban et al., 2014, p. 1). During my M.Phil. research fieldwork in Rajasthan (Biswas, 2019), I encountered challenges regarding privacy while conducting in-person interviews with Rajput women. In some cases, male family members were present in the same room, and at times, other family members overheard the interviews. This often made the women uncomfortable, leading them to remain silent or provide answers aligned with societal expectations. Additionally, some Rajput women would cover their faces in the presence of strangers, elders, other family members, and men, making it difficult for me to interpret non-verbal cues. However, I am not saying that privacy is not a barrier in Zoom interviews. While Zoom interviews offer flexibility, privacy concerns may still arise, as others could be present in the same room. To minimize this, I informed the participants beforehand to ensure no additional people or disturbances were present during the interview. Moreover, allowing the

participants to choose the time, location, and setting based on their convenience offered them more control, potentially ensuring greater privacy during the interview.

Virtual interviews also offer the scope to study the participants' verbal and non-verbal cues. In Zoom interviews, we can see the participants, their facial expressions, and hand gestures. Alistair Thomson notes that digital technologies and audio-visual recording of interviews are transforming how oral history interviews are recorded and preserved (Thomson, 2007, p. 68). Using webcams in virtual interviews can help record the participants' emotions or reactions, which they may not be able to express in words (Thomson, 2007, p. 68). I acknowledge that technical difficulties can occur during virtual interviews. For example, during one interview, a poor internet connection disconnected the interview briefly, but we rejoined soon after the connection stabilized. Zoom also offers the option for participants to take a pause during the interview if they feel uncomfortable or want a quick break from the discussion. For instance, one participant asked me to pause the recording and shared her personal story about her current life challenges. She did not want that to be recorded. Another participant, who was a housewife, took a quick break to instruct her domestic help on what to cook. These moments provide participants with enough comfort, flexibility, and control over the interview process. Additionally, platforms like Zoom are user-friendly, and participants do not need a Zoom account or the app installed on their computers or laptops to join the interview. This makes it easier to explain the logistics to participants.

This is not to say that using Zoom as a platform to conduct interviews is without limitations. Leslie Anne Anderson and Alison C. DeRiemer conducted an oral history project using Zoom to document the effects of the Pandemic in Nordic countries and the Pacific Northwest, organized by The National Nordic Museum in Seattle (Anderson & DeRiemer, 2021, p. 159). The authors note that using video conferencing technology is not devoid of challenges (Anderson & DeRiemer, 2021). For example, there may be cases where interviewees lack access to technology or the internet, or do not

have the necessary knowledge to use it (Anderson & DeRiemer, 2021). There may be a problem in capturing the diversity of participants who lack internet access. There might be limitations in terms of including participants from lower economic groups. Despite these challenges, using a virtual interview technique made the interview process more manageable and easier for me to reach the participants. I do not see virtual interviews as a barrier to building relationships or engaging with the participants. Conducting interviews on Zoom shifted my attention from worrying about logistical details, such as arranging the location and setting up the recording device, to focusing solely on the discussions during the interview.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected from semi-structured Zoom interviews were first transcribed to turn the spoken accounts into text. I used the software Trint to transcribe the audio recordings in English into text. The interviews conducted in Bengali were transcribed verbatim by listening to the audio recordings. Data was coded using the latest version of NVivo (NVivo 15, 2024), qualitative research software. I prepared a coding scheme (Appendix V) in NVivo after completing all the interviews. I used an inductive analytical approach to analyze the data. I began with open coding, reading the data, and developing codes and sub-codes (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021). I identified emerging ideas, concepts, and themes from the oral accounts of women and developed codes. I organized my data into themes to help identify my research findings (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021). Based on the research question, some of the themes I explored included women's perception of goddesses, family histories of goddess worship, ritual practices, goddess image in mainstream politics, goddesses as empowering figures, regional goddess figures, ideal Hindu woman model, and similarities and differences with the symbolic, stereotypical imagery of goddesses present in Hindutva discourse. Some of the codes in my coding scheme, such as "personal experience or understanding of goddesses", "goddesses in mainstream politics", conveyed a broader inclusion of women's responses, unlike the code "ideal

Hindu womanhood," which specifically focused on women's observations and responses on the Hindu womanhood model.

The primary source I consulted in my research on the text, *Devi Mahatmya,* is Pargiter's translation (1904) of *The Markandeya Purana*. Besides Pargiter's (1904) translation, I have read translations by Thomas B. Coburn (1992) and Swami Jagadisvarananda (1972). Both of them cited Pargiter's work in their translation of *Devi Mahatmya*. *Devi Mahatmya* is the earliest classical text that glorifies the goddess and is part of the early Sanskrit purana, the *Markandeya Purana*, a fifth- or sixth-century C.E. text (Coburn, 1984, p. 3). The text remains relevant in modern India and is recited in temples and during major festivals such as Navaratri[42] and Durga Puja (Jagadisvarananda, 1972). *Devi Mahatmya* is also known as *Durga Saptasi* (Jagadisvarananda, 1972). In the textual analysis of *Devi Mahatmya*, I employed an inductive approach, reading the text to identify themes, emerging concepts, and images. I developed my findings based on themes such as the empowering representation of the goddess, ambiguous imagery, warrior imagery, and regional variations in the goddess representations in the text. In analyzing the text, I did not use any coding framework. However, major themes and sub-themes emerged as I read the text, such as the formlessness of the goddess, the inclusive, the ferocious, and the transgressive goddess imagery. I examined how the text described the goddess, the meanings attached to the diverse representations, various forms of the goddess mentioned, and how the goddess is eulogized, indicating any similarities/dissimilarities with Hindutva's symbolic imagery of goddesses.

A similar analytical approach was employed to examine the representation of goddesses in Hindutva discourse. I examined the websites of Hindu Rights organizations, namely the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Rashtra Sevika Samiti, and Durga Vahini, with a

[42] Navaratri literally means nine nights, and it is a nine-day festival where the goddess is worshipped. Women usually eat vegetarian food or fast during Navaratri. It is a North-Indian festival.

specific focus on women's right-wing organizations and their portrayal of goddesses. I examined the information written on the websites of the organizations, mentions of units or departments on their websites, books, magazines about female historical figures, goddess symbols used by the organizations, written speeches, and posters to analyze the representations of the goddesses. Regarding photos or symbols, the Rashtra Sevika Samiti and Durga Vahini featured images of women as goddesses, and the Samiti used a goddess image as its party logo, which I included in my analysis. Other than that, as the primary source, I referred to newspaper articles, and as secondary sources, I referred to academic literature on goddess representations under Hindutva.

INTERVIEW OBSERVATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

I began the fieldwork in December 2023 with in-depth oral interviews via Zoom with professors, who provided valuable insights and a critical understanding of goddess imagery. Then, I started interviewing women from other fields and backgrounds. Some of them were social workers, researchers, homemakers, dance performers, educationists, and corporate employees with diverse perceptions of goddesses. During the interviews, women spoke about regional goddess worship, such as Bonobibi, Sitala, and Manasa. They also spoke about regional versions of Durga and Kali. The introduction of regional goddesses brings to the discussion the caste, class, and ethnicity-based understandings of the divine feminine. Unlike mainstream figures such as Durga. Lakshmi and Kali, these regional goddesses, are often worshipped by specific communities or families with a historical tradition. Hearing about the active presence of goddesses like Itu, Bonobibi, and Manasa challenged my assumption that women in urban areas predominantly worship mainstream figures.

Another observation from the fieldwork was women's general detachment from orthodox religious practices, with a greater emphasis on personal ways of connecting with the goddess. They redefined the concept of 'worship' by moving away from the conventional ritualistic practices

surrounding the goddess. Instead, their worship involved invoking the goddess through meditation, dance, personal interaction, and creating their own methods of connecting with the divine feminine.

Women challenged the notion of the ideal Hindu woman, a question asked during the interview. Most of the women I interviewed did not believe in any ideal Hindu woman image. Women suggested alternative figures as role models, including real-life figures, celebrities, literary figures, and mythological figures. The varied role models conveyed multiple ideas of womanhood that women believed in. It is not restricted to a single model of Hindu womanhood. Some women were unaware of the notion of Hindu womanhood. Their unawareness conveyed women's challenge to the patriarchal model of gender roles thrown at them. The responses also revealed that there is a plurality in the concept of womanhood, reflected in the varied role models and goddess figures women followed or looked up to.

The limitation I faced with the interviews was not having enough participants from the lower castes and classes due to the lack of adequate internet service or internet centers in remote areas where participants could access the internet. However, I have interviewed participants from low-caste backgrounds who are economically better off and have access to Wi-Fi. While I cannot claim that I have completely overcome all the challenges in recruiting women participants, I aimed for a nuanced understanding of goddesses in my research through my engagement with women and their perceptions of goddesses. I conducted the research while maintaining ethical standards. I tried to authentically present women's voices and ensure their perspectives are properly represented. I was aware of my positionality as a researcher throughout the interview process. I learned and unlearned from the experiences women shared when they narrated their life stories and their understanding of the divine feminine. I observed how women negotiated and resisted the Brahmanical patriarchal notions through their idea of goddesses. I tried to represent their voices of resistance properly in my research.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I outlined the methodology and methods I used to gather and analyze the data. I began by discussing the importance of feminist oral history practices and my positionality as a researcher, including ethical considerations related to feminist oral history research. I detailed the methods I employed to conduct interviews, including the advantages and disadvantages of using Zoom as a platform for online interviews. Additionally, I explained how I analyzed both oral accounts and the textual and Hindutva narratives of goddesses. I also addressed the limitations of my research and shared my field experiences in this chapter. The next chapter, Chapter 3, presents the first analysis of my research, focusing on how goddesses are represented in Hindutva organizations. It provides an in-depth analysis of the websites of these organizations and an examination of goddess imagery within Hindu nationalist thought. Chapter 4 examines goddess representations in *Devi Mahatmya*, contrasting the imagery with that found in Hindu nationalist discourse. The final chapters, Chapters 5 and 6, explore goddess representations in the oral narratives of Hindu women from West Bengal, India.

CHAPTER THREE: IMAGERY OF GODDESSES IN HINDU NATIONALIST THOUGHT

INTRODUCTION

On January 22nd, 2024, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi inaugurated the Ayodhya Ram Temple with a new mantra: "*Dev se desh; Ram se Rashtra* (from God to country, and from Ram to nation)[43]" (Pathak, 2024, para. 1). The formation of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, believed to be Ram's birthplace, has a controversial history of the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992 by the Hindu Right, which sparked the communal riot in India. While the entire country celebrated in unison the coming of Ram Lalla[44], the temple's construction symbolizes a new India where secularism and multiculturalism are compromised and Hindutva ideology becomes the norm. The question remains in this new India, which celebrates Ram as a national icon (Sen, 2024), what implications does this have for Muslims, indigenous peoples, and lower-caste Hindus?

The current actions by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), including the anti-Muslim nature of the debatable Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) passed in 2019 ("CAA: India's new," 2024[45]), mark a step towards fulfilling Hindutva ideology's promise of making India a Hindu nation (Menon, 2024). Hindutva ideology creates a narrative of fear, presenting Hindus as being overrun by external forces, which are usually conceptualized as Muslims. For example, ahead of the 2024 General Election in India, PM Modi, addressing a rally in Rajasthan on April 21, 2024, referred to Muslims as "infiltrators," who would take over the women and land of the Hindus if the Congress Party came to

[43] Quote taken from a newspaper article, The Indian Express. See Pathak, V. (2024, January 22). In Ayodhya Ram Temple speech, PM Modi says wait over links 'Dev to Desh', and 'Ram to Rashtra'. *The Indian Express*. https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/ayodhya-ram-temple-speech-pm-modi-9121993/ for more information.

[44] Lalla is a generic term defining male adolescence in India.

[45] The debatable Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), set to be implemented under Modi's leadership, will offer citizenship rights to the non-Muslim populations from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan who are facing religious persecution in the neighboring countries. See BBC News. (2024, March 12). *CAA: India's new citizenship law explained.* https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-50670393 for more information.

power (Travelli & Raj, 2024, para. 1[46]). Such statements, coupled with legislative policies like the CAA, raise critical questions regarding the status of non-Hindu communities and other marginalized communities in India, including women.

This chapter examines Hindutva or Hindu nationalist representations to determine whether and to what extent the goddess imagery under Hindutva reinforces stereotypical and patriarchal gender roles or empowers women. The central argument I present in this chapter is that the Hindutva discourse's use of goddess imagery, despite portraying goddesses like Durga and Kali as empowering and powerful, ultimately reinforces the Brahminical patriarchal model of gender norms and excludes women from lower castes, classes, and ethnic backgrounds. The Hindutva narrative creates an ideal Hindu womanhood model based on the stereotypical and homogenous representation of goddesses. Hindutva discourse presents a false idea of empowerment, which grants women members of Hindutva organizations certain rights and favors women's militant activism, but only for the cause of Hindutva politics, not to dismantle Brahminical patriarchy.

To understand the politics of goddess representation by Hindutva organizations, it is essential to discuss the ideology and key organizations that provide structural support to the Hindu nationalist politics. The chapter is divided into three key sections with subsections. The first section provides a comprehensive definition of Hindu Nationalism and its political agenda, as well as background information on key Hindutva organizations. The second section examines the role of Hindutva women's organizations within Hindutva politics and the use of goddess imagery by the organizations in recruiting women for the movement and shaping the image of Hindu womanhood. The third section focuses on the analysis of the goddess imagery, discussing the issues of empowerment, patriarchy, gender, caste, ethnicity, and class aspects embedded in goddess imagery under Hindu nationalism. The analysis examines the organizations' websites, as well as magazines, articles mentioned on the

[46] Taken from a newspaper article in The New York Times. See Travelli, A., & Raj, S. (2024, April 22). Modi calls Muslims 'Infiltrators' who would take India's wealth. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/22/world/asia/modi-speech-muslims.html for more information.

websites, along with newspapers and academic writings, to discuss the contextualization of goddesses in the Hindutva discourse and its impact on women in general.

The Hindutva organizations upheld a monolithic, domesticated version of goddesses that they use as a symbolic representation of their vision for Hindu women. A parallel is drawn between goddesses and Hindu women in the Hindu nationalist discourse, where women are seen as expressions of the goddess's power and strength, validating their significant presence in the Hindutva movement. To some extent, goddesses in Hindutva politics define women's position in Hindu nationalism, including how women are viewed and what they are expected to do. Hindutva discourse limits the representation of goddesses like Kali and Durga through domestication and spousification[47] (Menon, 2017) while glorifying figures like Sita who uphold a patriarchal, upper-caste narrative of the goddesses, limiting women's empowerment.

SECTION 1 HINDU NATIONALISM, IDEOLOGY, AND ORGANIZATIONS

Hindutva ideology focuses on the aspect of race and purity. Hindutva organizations like Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) establish Hindus as the dominant race over any other groups of people. Popular RSS leader M.S. Golwalkar believed in an extremist Hindu ideology (Golwalkar, 1939). Golwalkar praised Nazis, stating, "To keep up the purity of the Race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic Races-the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here" (Golwalkar, 1939, pp. 87-88). Although Golwalkar described Hindus as a race while expressing admiration for the German genocide, he did not consider Muslims or Christians to belong to distinct descent groups or biological types. He argues that India is a land of the Hindus, and those (the non-Hindus) in order to be a part of India must remain subordinated

[47] Spousification refers to the idea of understanding goddesses primarily as consort goddesses of male deities. See Menon, N. (2017, July 15). Bharat Mata and Her Unruly Daughters. *Kafila*. Retrieved November 11, 2025, from https://kafila.online/2017/07/15/bharat-mata-and-her-unruly-daughters/ for more information.

to the Hindu religion, culture, and language, or else they will remain foreigners to the Hindu nation (Golwalkar, 1939, p. 101). V.D. Savarkar believed India is predominantly a Hindu nation with "one language, one faith and one territory" (Sarkar, 2018, p. 9; Savarkar, 1989). All other religions, except Hinduism, originated outside Indian territory and are alien to the Hindu land (Sarkar, 2018, p. 9; Savarkar, 1989). Interestingly, the anti-democratic, fascist nature of the Hindutva organizations has not been met with strong criticism from the Global North (Gopalan, 2024). The reason can be the rise in right-wing extremism globally and the growing Islamophobia worldwide, which benefited the anti-Muslim policies of the Hindu nationalist political parties to escape direct criticism from the global community (Gopalan, 2024)[48].

At the heart of Hindu nationalist politics lies the Hindutva ideology, which was founded on the works of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar[49] (Shani, 2021, p. 268). He used the term Hindutva to denote a specific Hindu identity with both ethnic and religious connotations, providing all Hindus with a collective sense of belonging (Shani, 2021, pp. 268-269). Savarkar visualized Hindus as a community with similar racial and cultural features and considered Indian Muslims as foreigners who are traitors to their nation (Shani, 2021, p. 269). According to Berglund, V.D. Savarkar established the concept of Hindutva, which defines a true Hindutva believer as someone who upholds Hindu culture and civilization, regards their country as a holy land, and has Hindu blood flowing in their veins (Berglund, 2009, p. 387). A similar idea of Hindutva was shared by M.S. Golwalkar, who spoke about the “Hindu way of life” (Golwalkar, 1968, p. 54), where Hindu *sanskars* (traditions) play a crucial role in the formation of a true Hindu citizen. Golwalkar defined Hindus as "the enlightened -The Aryas" (Golwalkar, 1968, p. 47) and other communities as the "Mlecchas" (meaning the untouchables)

[48] See Gopalan, A. (Host). (2024, February 22). Hindu nationalism's new temple [Audio podcast episode]. In *On the Nose*. Jewish Currents. https://jewishcurrents.org/hindu-nationalisms-new-temple for more information.

[49] V.D. Savarkar developed the concept of Hindutva. See Singh, K.C. (2016). In the Service of Nationalism: Women in the Hindu Nationalist Paradigm, *Fudan J. Hum. Soc. Sci*, pp. 496-497 for more information.

(Golwalkar, 1968, p. 47). Golwalkar visualised women in traditional gender roles. He spoke about the image of Savitri as the ideal image for contemporary Hindu women in current times (Berglund, 2009, p. 390). Savitri is a mythological female figure found in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, known for her devotion towards her husband. She challenged the death god Yama to bring back her husband's life (Berglund, 2009; Pandey, 2024). Berglund notes that although there are other interpretations of Savitri's figure which are empowering, Golwalkar visualised Savitri with dutiful roles of wives and mothers, as Golwalkar did not envision women outside these traditional roles (Berglund, 2009, p. 390).

Hindu nationalism is a form of cultural nationalism that centers on the Hindu religion and Hindu culture as the basis of the Hindu state (Berglund, 2009, p. 387). Hindu Nationalism creates a homogenous notion of Hindus primarily identified as upper-caste, middle-class Hindus that alienates non-Hindu communities and those who do not identify with Brahmanical Hinduism, which includes Dalits[50], lower-caste groups, and indigenous groups. Hindutva ideology believes in the idea of Hindu as the 'national culture" (Shani, 2021, p. 264) of India and appropriates minority religious communities into the Hindu culture (Shani, 2021). Jaffrelot points out the difference in Hindu nationalist policy from the Gandhian and Nehruvian conceptualization of the nation-building process, where the focus was on defining India based on territory and not religion or culture (Jaffrelot, 2007). However, Hindu nationalists, much like extremist Islamic bodies, visualized India as a Hindu-majority country where Indian culture is synonymous with Hindu culture, in which minorities are appropriated with the idea that they will adhere to the majority culture (Jaffrelot, 2007). Jaffrelot describes the Hindu nationalist movement as a form of ethnic nationalism, with the primary goal being "Hindu, Hindi, Hindustan" (Jaffrelot, 2007, p. 5). Apart from the policy of the appropriation of other minority religious and lower-caste communities into the monolithic Hindu identity, Hindu nationalists also co-opted women in their politics through the introduction of various iconographies of mythological,

[50] Dalits are referred to as Scheduled Castes in India, positioned at the lowest level of the caste hierarchy in India.

historical, and religious female figures. In this co-option, women entered particular roles, both as active proponents of the movement and as upholders of the honor of the Hindu nation.

1.1 ROLE OF RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS ICONS

Uma Chakravarti (1998) discussed the political turmoil in India during the 1980s that consisted of regional agitation in Punjab, the assassination of Indira Gandhi, and upper caste agitation on the Mandal Commission[51], and many more (Chakravarti, 1998, p.225). In this context, Hindutva ideology rose to prominence with its Hindu majoritarian ideology (Chakravarti, 1998, p. 225). The 1980s witnessed the restructuring of India's past, with particular emphasis on the iconography of Hindu religious figures and retellings of the Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. National television played a significant role in this reconstruction (Chakravarti, 1998, pp. 225–226). *Ramayana*[52] serial gained the most popularity as it represented authentic Hindu culture and the martial valour of Lord Ram (Chakravarti, 1998). The epic is about the story of Lord Ram, who wages war with the King of Lanka, Ravana, to bring back his wife Sita, who was abducted by Ravana (Corbridge, 1999, p. 234). Arvind Rajagopal notes that the serial aired in the context of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement (Rajagopal, 2001). Ram Janmabhoomi (Birthplace of Ram) Movement[53] marked the rise of Hindu nationalist politics, gaining momentum and popularity among Hindus. The movement clearly

[51] Mandal commission aimed to reserve seats for jobs and education for the backward classes in India. See Dhawan, N. B. (2017). From 'fire-brand' to 'water-brand': The caste politics of Uma Bharati. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, *23*(4), p. 499. https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2017.1385249

[52] The serial was aired from 1987 to 1989 on the Indian national television. See Rajagopal, Arvind. (2001). Hindu Nationalism and the Cultural forms of Indian Politics. In A. Rajagopal (Eds.), *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, p. 30 for more information.

53. The issue on which the movement began was based on the understanding that the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, India, was built on a disputed land that was meant for a Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Ram. See Corbridge, S. (1999). 'The militarization of all Hindudom'? The Bharatiya Janata Party, the bomb, and the political spaces of Hindu nationalism. *Economy and Society*, *28*(2), pp. 233-34. https://doi.org/10.1080/03085149900000004

stated the agenda of Hindu nationalism, which is to create a Hindu India where the notion of secularity is in question.

Religious identity and religious icons form the core of the Hindutva movement. Hindu nationalists redesigned the figure of Ram as a manly, well-built warrior to reflect the "armed masculinity" of Hindu men (Banerjee, 2006, p. 62; 2010, p. 274). Banerjee notes that traditionally the image of Ram is "androgynous and unmuscled, displaying curves that could be considered feminine and hence unacceptable to muscular nationalism" (Banerjee, 2010, p. 274). The iconographic gods and goddesses and Hindu epics are selectively crafted to suit Hindutva's political agenda (Ganguly, 2024). McLain argues that the selective reading of epic and popular figures disregards the regional and alternative interpretations of such tales and figures (McLain, 2001; Ganguly, 2024). The writing of Periyar E.V. Ramasami's *Sacchi Ramayana* (2011) instead of upholding the image of Ram as the ideal Hindu male model, described Ravana as the perfect hero to highlight the oppression of the Dravidians by the North Indians (Ramasami, 2011; McLain, 2001, p. 33). However, such retellings are not appropriated by Hindu nationalism as it will defeat the purpose of Hindutva politics in forming a unified collective Hindu identity.

1.2 HINDUTVA ORGANIZATIONS, STRUCTURE, AND THEIR KEY TENETS

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founded in 1925, provided the institutional basis for the Hindu nationalist movement (Shani, 2021, p. 270). The organization was established to protect and propagate Hindu culture. The motto behind the formation of the RSS was to bring together all Hindus with the collective aim of forming a Hindu society, preserving Hindu culture, and motivating Hindu youth towards the cause of Hindutva (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2025, n.d.).[54]. According to Jaffrelot, although Savarkar laid down the ideology, it was put into action by Keshav Baliram

[54] I have used the official website of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh as my primary source for my research. Here is the website link: https://www.rss.org/index.html.

Hedgewar, who founded the RSS, which trained the Hindu youth and propagated Hindutva ideology (Jaffrelot, 2007, p. 16). The RSS describes India as Bharat[55], comprising a national identity embedded in Hindu culture, tradition, and spirituality, defined as 'Dharma[56]' (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2025, n.d.). The organization aims towards national reconstruction, which involves building a character in Hindus who are devoted to the Motherland[57], believe in their Hindu identity, and are courageous, disciplined, and trained (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2025, n. d.). According to Tanika Sarkar, the RSS is a "cultural organization" (Sarkar, 2021, p. 112), in addition to being a political unit. From the beginning, these organizations, like the RSS, have been committed and involved in overtaking the minds of young Hindus to inculcate in them Hindutva ideology and the idea of the Hindu nation. The primary target is upper-caste, wealthy, middle-class, educated Hindu men and women (Sarkar, 2021). The RSS felt the need to reinforce Hindu culture and values (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2025, n. d.) that they claimed were being eroded because of Muslims, Christians, and rapid westernization. The purpose is to preserve the spirit of patriotism towards Bharat Mata (Mother India) (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2025, n.d.). After Hedgewar, M.S. Golwalkar became the head of the RSS, also known as the *Sar-sanghachalak*[58] (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2025, n.d.).

The RSS has *shakhas* (branches), *pracharaks* (preachers or social workers), and *Swayamsevaks* (volunteers) to recruit and train young Hindu men (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2025, n.d.). *Pracharaks* are primarily RSS members who dedicate their lives to the organization and travel to expand their networks in various regions (Jaffrelot, 2007, p. 16). *Shakhas* are local branches where young boys are involved in activities like yoga, physical exercise, patriotic singing, and training to use

[55] Another term for India.

[56] Dharma has multiple meanings; however, the organization uses it here as virtue.

[57] Motherland refers to India.

[58] Meaning the supreme leader or the chief of the organization.

a *lathi* or stick (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2025, n.d.). RSS and other Hindu Right organizations have a saffron flag, called the *Bhagawa Dhwaj,* and young members sing to the saffron flag and Bharat Mata (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2025, n.d.). The organization also observes many Hindu festivals, in addition to worshiping Chatrapati Shivaji[59] (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2025, n.d.), a renowned Maratha king and warrior who has been co-opted into Hindu nationalist discourse.

In 1964, the RSS founded the Vishwa Hindu Parishad[60] (VHP) to bring together Hindu priests, religious leaders, and various Hindu religious sects under one umbrella organization, providing a concrete structure for Hinduism (Jaffrelot, 2007, p. 19). VHP is a platform for Hindu religious leaders to define Hinduism and protect the Hindu religion. It is responsible for spreading the Hindu religion in India and the diaspora (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). VHP is known for dealing with religious and cultural issues like temple building, cow protection, and dealing with reconversions of Hindus from Christianity and Islam who are forcibly converted by non-Hindu communities (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.[61]). The organization is most notable for its involvement in the Ram Janmabhoomi movement in the 1980s. VHP initiated worshiping bricks with the name of the Ram engraved on them, called the *Ram Shila*[62], with which VHP members planned to build the temple of Ram in Ayodhya (Jaffrelot, 2007, p. 20). According to VHP, Muslims and Christians attacked the traditional culture of India by systematically eroding the Hindu identity of the nation and removing the supremacy of Hindus over the land (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.).

The VHP's main motive is to safeguard the ancient Hindu society and values. The aim is to recover the Hindu land from the infiltration of alien faiths and reinforce Hindu supremacy (Vishva

[59] Shivaji is a well-known Maratha warrior and ruler of the Maratha Empire in India in the 17th century. See Desai, R. R. (2025, August 24). *Shivaji: Indian King*. Britannica.com. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Shivaji.

[60] I have used the spelling Vishwa Hindu Parishad or VHP throughout my research. The spelling is Vishva Hindu Parishad on the official page of the organization.

[61] I consulted the official website of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad as my primary source for my research. Here is the link to the website: https://www.vhp.org/ .

[62] Meaning a sacred rock or stone.

Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). In VHP's narrative, Hindu men are no longer weak or effeminate and can defend their Motherland and their women (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.).

Apart from the goal to protect the Hindu religion, VHP started the campaign on anti-Love Jihad to safeguard Hindu women from Muslim men. Love Jihad refers to a romantic relationship between a Muslim man and a Hindu woman, which the Hindutva organization claimed was a strategy practiced by Muslims to allure Hindu women and convert them into the Muslim faith (Sarkar, 2018). The campaign, also known as the anti-Romeo campaign[63] (Verma, 2017), allowed all forms of violence against the Muslim community, including Dalits and lower caste groups, leading to cases of mob violence, vandalism, and lynching of Dalits and Muslims on the pretext of Love Jihad (Sarkar, 2018, p. 11). This form of violence was not only restricted to prohibiting love between different religious groups or castes. It was a mechanism to control the sexuality of Hindu women and their freedom to enter into romantic relationships with someone they chose.

There are other units under VHP, such as Matru Sakti (Maternal Power), Durga Vahini (Durga's Army), Gow-Raksha Vibhag (Cow Protection unit), Bharat Sanskrit Parishad (Indian Sanskrit unit), Dharm-Prasar[64], and Dharmacharya Sampark[65], with subdivisions including Sadhwi Shakti Parishad[66] and Yuva Sant[67]. (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). Matru Sakti is the unit of VHP dedicated to the contribution of women in the social, religious, and cultural spheres. It is committed to increasing women's representation in the council (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). Matru Sakti's work includes awareness of social issues like female foeticide and protests against obscenity and dowry. Other services include setting up sewing centers for women, providing

[63] See Verma, L. (2017, March 24). Anti-Romeo and Love Jihad: experiments in moral policing in Uttar Pradesh. *The Indian Express*, https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/anti-romeo-love-jihad-experiments-in-moral-policing-in-uttar-pradesh/, for more information.

[64] Meaning spreading of Hindu values and virtues.

[65] A specific unit dedicated to Hindu religious leaders.

[66] A unit dedicated to the power of ascetic women.

[67] A council for young Hindu monks or ascetics.

educational guidance to children, and offering a refuge for women in need (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). The Gow-Raksha Vibhag of VHP takes up issues including cow rearing, conservation of cows, and also surveillance against cow slaughtering. It is the unit made to show respect and safeguard the mother cow, who is considered holy (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). The Hindutva movement justifies the worship of the cow as intrinsic to Hindu culture and religion, as it is believed by Hindutva groups that Hindu gods reside in the mother cow, and it is a symbol of national honor (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). According to VHP, foreign influence accompanied by the presence of other non-Hindu religions led to the slaughter of cows in India (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). The non-Hindu or foreign religions also led to the exploitation of Hindu women and destruction of Hindu temples, with the motive to marginalize and erase the Hindus and treat them as enslaved people (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). Thus, the unit was set up by VHP as a step towards ending Hindu slavery and to protect Hindu values and culture, including the cows (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.).

Bharat Sanskrit Parishad (Indian Sanskrit council) under VHP was established to spread and re-ignite interest in the Sanskrit language to form centers that will teach the language (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). Dharmacharya Sampark (Religious outreach unit) is divided into Sadhwi Shakti Parishad (Council for empowerment of women ascetics) and Yuva Sant (Young ascetic unit). VHP created Sadhwi Shakti Parishad in opposition to the idea that Western civilization is erasing Hindu values in women and destroying the Hindu family structure (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). Hindu women ascetics, respected for their religious authority, have the power to instill the values and principles of Hindu ideologies in Hindu women, promoting the well-being of Hindu families and society (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). The VHP established the Yuva Sant unit to integrate young Hindu religious leaders into the day-to-day operations of the VHP. The VHP's task is to familiarize young religious male ascetics and leaders with the organization's functions through various

religious meetings and to continue their work in protecting Hinduism (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.).

The two most prominent organizations under VHP are Bajrang Dal[68] and Durga Vahini (Durga's Army). The Bajrang Dal gained importance for its role during the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, particularly during the Ayodhya *Rath Yatra*[69] in the 1980s. Bajrang Dal was created to counter any opposition against Hindu religious and cultural sentiments. Built to attract mainly young Hindu men, the unit was formed to safeguard the *Rath Yatra* (Chariot festival) conducted by the VHP in October 1984 and to call for a mass mobilization of Hindus (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). Bajrang Dal is a militant wing of the Hindutva movement, mainly involved in protest rallies for cow protection, defending Hindu tradition, creating a martial male youth Hindu brigade, and opposing any attack on Hindu religion, traditions, and beliefs (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). The unit's primary purpose is "Service, Security, and Sanskar[70]" until they can fulfill Lord Ram's purpose (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.).

Another well-known organization is the Durga Vahini[71], under the VHP. The organization was founded in 1984 for young Hindu women who were drawn to the VHP's mission (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). The organization is an independent unit dedicated to young Hindu women, much like Bajrang Dal, which is mainly comprised of young Hindu men. The members of Durga Vahini range in age from 15 to 35 years, and their mission is to safeguard the Hindu nation and Hindu tradition, as well as to promote the spread of the Sanskrit language (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021,

[68] The literal meaning of Bajrang Dal is the brigade for Lord Hanuman, a popular Hindu deity also known as Bajrangbali. Lord Hanuman symbolizes power and courage.

[69] The Chariot festival is very popular in Odisha, India. It is a celebration honoring Lord Jaganatha, a form of Vishnu or Krishna. However, the Chariot festival I refer to here was organized by the BJP and Hindutva organizations as a march dedicated to Lord Ram. It was part of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement campaign, where political leaders rallied around the chariot to claim the site for a Ram temple on the disputed land of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, India.

[70] Sanskar means tradition. See https://www.vhp.org/bajrang_dal/ for more information.

[71] See https://www.vhp.org/durga_vahini/ for more information.

n.d.). The reason for forming this independent women's platform by VHP was the strong involvement of women as *karsevikas*[72] in the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. These women are conceptualized as reflections of the goddess Durga and are entrusted with the duty to secure Hindu culture, safeguard Hindu society, and foster religious and spiritual harmony based on Hindu values. Like Durga, women of Durga Vahini will fight the evils of society (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.).

Another independent women's organisation, formed by the RSS, is the Rashtra Sevika Samiti (the Samiti[73]). The Samiti, founded in 1936 by Lakshmibai Kelkar[74], perceived women as a reflection of Durga, who are trusted with the duty to protect their motherland and the Hindu religion. The Samiti views women as a combination of the goddesses Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Kali (Rashtra Sevika Samiti, 2025, n.d.)[75]. The Samiti believes that the most essential part of Hindu society is women, whose existence determines the future of Hindu society (Rashtra Sevika Samiti, 2025, n.d.). Lakshmibai Kelkar formed the organization to awaken every Hindu woman's power and utilize this power in the national building process (Rashtra Sevika Samiti, 2025, n.d.). The website of the Samiti features imagery of Durga, as the organization's symbol, standing in front of a lion and carrying the *Bhagawa Dhwaj* (the Hindutva saffron Flag) with a halo to symbolize her divine power (Rashtra Sevika Samiti, 2025, n.d.). In the background of the picture, there is a piece of land that resembles the southern part of India's territory. The picture of Durga that Samiti's website uses is a fair-complexioned Durga who appears non-aggressive. She is smiling and giving blessings (Rashtra Sevika Samiti, 2025, n.d.). The Durga that Samiti presents is a North Indian version of Sherawali Mata[76], rather than the Durga of

[72] Meaning female volunteers.
[73] I have referred to Rashtra Sevika Samiti as the Samiti in my research.

[74] Kelkar was also called *Mausiji* by the Samiti women.

[75] I used the official website of Rashtra Sevika Samiti as my primary source for research on goddess imagery. Here is the link to the website: https://www.rashtrasevikasamiti.org . [Note: I started researching the Samiti's websites at the beginning of 2023. Recently, in 2025, the website's design and presentation changed, which also affected some of the information listed on the site.]

[76] Sherawali Mata is a variation of Durga widely known in northern India and worshipped during Navaratri, a nine-day festival in North India.

West Bengal, which features ten arms, holds weapons, and is depicted as aggressive, riding a lion and killing a demon. The website also features multiple photos of ordinary Hindu women of all ages wearing sarees, holding sticks, and carrying the *Bhagawa Dhwaj* in their hands (Rashtra Sevika Samiti, 2025, n.d.), resembling Durga's power.

The Samiti has local branches or *shakhas*, which are dedicated spaces for women members to practice yoga, engage in exercise, sing patriotic songs, and discuss nation-building topics (Rashtra Sevika Samiti, 2025, n.d.). The Samiti has other units dedicated to education for women, including *Gruhini Vidyalaya* (a vocational training unit), hostels, tuition classes, a *Seva* or service unit to care for children, health-related services, a self-reliance unit, and *Samskara,* or a value education unit (Rashtra Sevika Samiti, 2025, n.d.). One of the most crucial aspects of women's roles in Samiti, in addition to activism and social reform, is the role of service. The *Seva* or service unit of the organization views women as possessing the qualities of a nurturer (Rashtra Sevika Samiti, 2025, n.d.). The unit offers support for women who are victims of violence and are trained by the Samiti, which later sends them to different regions to establish similar units to support women facing similar forms of abuse or homelessness (Rashtra Sevika Samiti, 2025, n.d.).

Religion is central to Hindutva politics. Many Hindu Rights organizations are established on auspicious religious days. For example, Durga Vahini was founded on *Durga Ashtami*, symbolizing Durga's victory over demons (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). Hindutva leaders, like Narendra Modi, are presented with a God-like image. The deification of Hindutva political leaders helps the Hindu nationalist movement garner the support of the Hindu population, blending religious symbolism with mainstream politics. The following section explores the imagery of goddesses in Hindutva discourse. Analyzing how Hindutva organizations depict and use goddesses provides insight into women's roles within the largely masculine Hindu nationalist politics. The examination of goddess imagery also generates insights into the creation of an ideal Hindu womanhood model by Hindutva organizations that uphold Brahmanical patriarchal norms.

SECTION 2 GODDESSES AND WOMEN IN HINDUTVA ORGANIZATIONS

The representation of goddesses in Hindutva discourse extends beyond the glorification or justifying increased female participation in the movement. It is intertwined with power dynamics, where privileged Hindu Right leaders refashion goddess imagery to create role models for women that reinforce Brahmanical patriarchy. The goddess narrative promotes a Hindu supremacist vision of India's past, popularizing an upper-caste depiction of gods and goddesses. The symbolic representations of goddesses legitimize caste hierarchy, promoting the Hindu nationalist agenda. Through my discussion in this section, I highlight the active presence of goddesses in Hindutva organisations, mainly the Samiti and Durga Vahini, and how it is interlinked with women's roles and expectations within the Hindu nationalist movement.

Hindutva's cultural nationalism has implications for women's roles within the movement and society, who are expected to abide by Hindu values and norms (Berglund, 2009, p. 388). Initially, women's roles in Hindutva politics were limited to passive and benevolent roles of mothers, wives, and breeders. Organizations like the RSS and the VHP have traditionally been male-dominated (Berglund, 2009). Later, the VHP and RSS felt the need to establish women's wings to include young Hindu women in the fold of Hindutva politics (Berglund, 2009). Under the supervision of Lakshmibai Kelkar, RSS formed the Samiti in 1936 (Sarkar, 2021, p. 101), and Durga Vahini was established due to the active involvement of women in Hindutva political campaigns. As noted earlier, V.D. Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar had limited ideas about women's roles in Hindu nationalism, other than traditional gender roles, during the initial phase of the Hindutva movement (Berglund, 2009, p. 389). However, the role of women changed, with women like Uma Bharti and Sadhvi Rithambara emerging as leaders whose speeches played a crucial role in adding to the intolerance against the Muslims (Sarkar, 2021, p. 103).

As women gained more prominence in Hindutva politics, Hindu nationalists equated women with warrior goddesses like Durga, Kali, and Ashtabhuja. According to Singh, a paradigm emerged where women are associated with both "matrishakti" (Mother's power) (Singh, 2016, p. 494) and traditional roles within the family, as well as more aggressive roles as strong proponents of Hindutva. The latter is associated with warrior goddesses like Kali and Durga, where women are often imagined as daughters of these goddesses. The primary role of women as upholders of the honour of the Hindu family and the Hindu nation remained intact.

2.1 WOMEN, NATION, AND GODDESSES

This is not the first time that women's fate in any movement is connected to the nation and family. Banerjee argues that nationalism is based on the social construction of masculine and feminine roles, determining how men and women participate in nationalism (Banerjee, 2003, p. 167). According to Charu Gupta, nationalism employs symbols such as the female body in defining a nation, often by imagining a country as a motherland (Gupta, 2001, p. 4291).

Women's bodies have been identified as "signifiers of the nationalism", dating back to colonial times in India (Singh, 2016, p. 494). Banerjee notes that nationalism used the idea of "chaste femininity" (Banerjee, 2012, p. 11) and the image of dutiful, obedient women as symbols of the nation, conveyed through varied figures like Mother India and Sita, symbolizing Indian tradition and Hindu womanhood (Banerjee, 2012, p. 11). Women's bodies were equated with safeguarding "Indian culture" (Austin, 2014, p. 128) and with the duty to impart nationalist ideas and stories to children, thereby creating a deeper connection with the nation (Banerjee, 2003, pp. 167-168). A woman's body was often symbolized as the nation's honor (Banerjee, 2003). Here, honor refers to the sexual purity and chastity of the female body.

The territory of India was transformed into an 'anthropomorphic' representation of Mother India (Ramaswamy, 2010, p. 14) during the nationalist movement, and any violation of Mother India

was considered an act of violating the country's sovereignty. It is not a new phenomenon to use imagery of goddesses in politics and movement. Bharat Mata or Mother India is a creation of the nationalist movement in India in the late 19th century (Ramaswamy, 2010). The use of goddesses was necessary during the nationalist movement to bring women out of the domestic sphere and draw them to India's freedom struggle. Goddesses have always been essential to Hindu society and informed Hindu women's roles. Samjukta Gombrich Gupta argues that for ordinary women, ideal models of womanhood have been figures like Sita and Savitri, who are known for their dedication towards their husbands (Gombrich, 2000, p. 88). Hansen argues that even though these figures have no direct relationship with women's everyday lives, it is challenging to disregard figures like Sita and Savitri as they convey an important set of behavioural roles for Hindu women (Hansen, 1988, p. WS25).

2.2 HINDUTVA WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS[77], GODDESS, WOMEN

The Samiti's visualization of women as goddesses and as the ideal Hindu woman is reflected in Lakshmibai Kelkar's life story, who is viewed as a role model for the women members within the organization. Lakshmibai Kelkar, also known as *Mausiji,* believed that traditional Hindu women possessed the goddess's power. In her life story, Kelkar is described as the "immortal" being (Rai, 1996, p. 2)[78], a warrior, a true patriot, and someone who dedicated her life to nation-building and to uphold Hinduism (Rai, 1996). Kelkar was an ardent devotee of Ram and Krishna, deeply attached to the Hindu religion, and worshipped gods and sang devotional songs (Rai, 1996, p. 5). Her name was changed from Kamal to Lakshmi, as she was believed to signify the goddess Lakshmi, who would bring prosperity and wealth to her family (Rai, 1996, p. 10). She possessed leadership qualities, which she utilized to motivate other women to focus on the nation (Rai, 1996, p. 12). Kelker is also portrayed

[77] By Hindutva women organizations, I refer to the women's right-wing organizations in Hindutva politics that are run mostly by women members.

[78]The book on Kelkar, written by Dr. Rajani Rai, published by Sevika Prakashan, was on the website of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti. The book is dedicated to the founder of the organization, narrating the life story of Kelkar and her achievements. It is a primary source I consulted to analyze the representation of women and goddesses in Samiti's understanding.

as a dutiful ideal Hindu wife whose love for the nation did not divert her from household duties, which she balanced with her "excellent domestic abilities" (Rai, 1996, p. 15).

Kelkar believed that women have roles beyond family duties and can be instrumental in the national building process. She wanted women to learn new skills and was inspired by Gandhi's idea of women as Sita (Rai, 1996, p. 19). According to Kelkar, Sita was a devoted wife, and her spiritual strength helped her protect herself from Ravana (Rai, 1996, p. 21). Kelkar wanted women to attain that spiritual strength and moral power to protect themselves from Muslim men (Rai, 1996, p. 21).

The primary aim of Kelkar was to inculcate in Hindu women love and pride for the Hindu religion, culture, and Hindu values, which were being eroded by Western culture and ideology. Kelkar defined service as an extension of the duties that women perform in their households for their families, which is extended to the nation. The service to the nation involves sacrifices, devotion, obedience, selfless work towards society, and upholding traditions, Hindu values, and culture (Rai, 1996, pp. 25-27). Thus, the role that women assumed as Samiti members is that of 'Sevika' (Rai, 1996, p. 27), whose sole aim is 'national service' (Rai, 1996, p. 27). The Samiti opened on the day of Vijayadashami, which is the day when goddess Durga defeated the demons and attained victory (Rai, 1996). It is used as a symbolic expression of the rise of women's power and of Samiti's work to save the nation from the enemy by invoking Durga (Rai, 1996).

Aside from the Samiti's adoration of Sita and Durga, the Samiti also valorizes Ram. It was evident in Kelkar's idolization of Ram as a savior (Rai, 1996, p. 42). Ram became part of the Samiti's discourse and speeches, with Kelkar herself delivering public speeches in various cities on *Ramayana* (Rai, 1996, p. 43). The Samiti also incorporated other figures that Kelkar considered significant, such as historical figures Chatrapati Shivaji, Rani Lakshmibai, Jijabai, and Ahilyabai (Rai, 1996, p. 45). For Samiti, three ideals are necessary: leadership, exemplified by Rani Lakshmibai, efficiency, as seen in Ahilyabai, and motherhood qualities, such as those of Jijabai[79] (Rai, 1966, p. 45). All these historical

[79] Jijabai is a well-known historical figure who was the mother of Chatrapati Shivaji, the ruler of the Maratha.

figures fall within the *Virangana*[80] paradigm of the 19th-century nationalist period in India, which was later appropriated by Hindu nationalism to invoke a sacrificial, dutiful model of Hindu women.

Kelkar perceived Sita and Ram as the exemplary Hindu model and urged Samiti women to follow in Sita's footsteps, who had realized her responsibilities and duties towards Ram (Rai, 1996). Sita acted as a queen, as a mother, and as a devoted wife, and Hindu women should be dutiful like Sita, who can submit themselves to the nation (Rai, 1966, p. 46). Kelkar initiated the ritual of worshipping goddess Shakti, an "eight-armed avtaar " (Rai, 1966, p. 50). She equated women with the goddess Shakti and saw the women's members of the Samiti as playing a divine role, akin to that of goddesses (Rai, 1996). The goddess Shakti is depicted carrying a saffron flag of Hindutva, the Gita, a bell, Agni-kund[81] (Rai, 1966, p. 50), a sword and beads in her seventh and eighth hands, while she bestows blessings (Rai, 1966, p. 50). The goddess symbolizes virtues and motherhood (Rai, 1966, p. 50). This goddess, Shakti, is also known as Ashtabhuja, and Samiti women recite the Ashtabhuja prayer as part of the worship ritual (Rai, 1966, p. 51).

Samiti followed Kelkar's vision of Hindu women, for whom dedication is the ultimate quality. For Samiti, the ideal image of a Hindu woman is one who worships daily, manages her household, and is dedicated to the nation. Kelker's view of women emphasized the ongoing importance of women's primary role as caregivers, a perspective that Samiti follows in training women. The deification of Kelkar as an ideal wife, patriot, and mother highlights an archetype of the Hindu woman model that the Samiti promotes through its principles. By worshiping goddesses and engaging in their work as Samiti workers, the Samiti claims that women develop seven powers or Sapta Shakti- Shree or auspiciousness, Keerti or Fame, Vaak or Fine Speech, Smruti or memory, Medha or intellect, Dhruti

[80] *Virangana* are women who are courageous, fight in battles, and symbolize virtue, honesty, and bravery. I have discussed this model and its cooptation by Hindutva doctrine in detail in a later section of this chapter. See Hansen, K. (1988). The Virangana in North Indian History: Myth and Popular Culture. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *23*(18), WS25–WS33. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4378431 for more information.

[81] Fire pit.

or patience, and Kshama or forgiveness (Rashtra Sevika Samiti, 2025, n.d.). The organization's perception of goddesses as protectors and nurturers reflects what is expected of Hindu women within and outside Hindu nationalist politics. The goal is to awaken the power within women and utilize it for the nation's upliftment (Rashtra Sevika Samiti, 2025, n.d.).

Like Samiti, Durga Vahini (Durga's Army) also equates women with goddesses. The organisation refers to young female members as Durgas. Durga Vahini is a unit created by VHP, a male organization. The main idea behind the creation of Durga Vahini by VHP is that the young women are expected to emulate the goddess, Durga, who destroyed the demon and re-established order. Thus, the Durgas of Durga's Army will follow the path of the goddess in re-establishing and maintaining Hindu culture and order in Hindu society. The organization idolizes Durga and visualizes women as the caretakers of the Hindu nation, culture, values, and society (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). The uniform of the women members consists of a white *salwar* or *kurta*[82], a saffron *chuniri*[83], white shoes, and a belt with the inscription "Durga Vahini" (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). The motto of the organisation is "Service, Security and Sanskar", similar to VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). Women in Durga Vahini recite the *Durga Saptasati* or *Devi Mahatmya* (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). Although the organization states that women's primary duty is towards the nation, that should not replace family duties. That is why the organization focuses on discussing the role of young women in both nation-building and their role as good homemakers (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). Apart from training women in using weapons like guns, sticks, and daggers, the organization trains young women in Hindu values and tradition so that they turn out to be good mothers, daughters, and wives who can keep the family values intact and create a healthy Hindu society rooted in Hindu tradition (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.).

[82] A loose tunic worn by women in India.

[83] A long scarf to cover the tunic.

Apart from Durga Vahini, the Sadhwi Shakti Parishad, under the VHP, comprises women religious leaders and ascetics who disseminate the concepts of equality, unity, and development among women members of the Hindu nationalist movement (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). The unit inculcates Hindu ideologies, religion, and truths about Hindu culture in Hindu women to preserve the Hindu tradition and promote their spiritual well-being (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). In Hindutva organizations, women are also visualized as prakrti, or the feminine energy that maintains balance. The VHP believes in the Hindu religious concept of purush (the male) and prakrti (the female), where purush is the supreme entity and prakrti is the feminine principle, possessing power and energy. Together, purush and prakrti create the universe (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.). However, the VHP believes the balance is undermined by the feminist ideals of liberation and freedom, which threaten the concept of the Hindu culture of purush and prakrit and impart in women ideas of liberation that challenged the ancient Hindu system (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.).

The goddesses in Hindutva organisations shape the notion of ideal Hindu womanhood in the Hindutva discourse. Their visualisations, along with the presence of female historical figures, indicate more importance given to focusing on women 's role in the Hindu community, religion, and culture while neglecting women's right to 'self-determination' (Sarkar, 2021, pp. 96-97). In this form of cultural nationalism, the Hindu woman is tasked with safeguarding the nation and preserving the Hindu culture and community. The Hindu culture, in turn, thrives on women's obedience and dedication to protect the community's interests (Sarkar, 2021). In this context, the political role of women in Hindutva politics does not involve having individual rights or the ability to determine their terms of participation in the Hindutva movement. This raises a critical question about the goddess's presence in Hindutva discourse -does goddess imagery empower women or reinforce patriarchy that limits women's autonomy?

SECTION 3 DISCUSSION

Kovacs discusses the question of empowerment in the appropriation of goddesses by Hindu nationalism (Kovacs, 2004, p. 383). The Samiti draws on two essential goddesses to symbolize their organization: Bharat Mata (Mother India) and Ashtabhuja (Bacchetta, 1993, p. 40). The Samiti references images from the Sanskrit text *Devi Mahatmya*, dated to the 6th century (Bacchetta, 2002, p. 164). The goddess models evoked by Samiti, regardless of what they imply or represent, have the main subject as "upper-caste, middle-class Hindu women" (Bacchetta, 2002, p. 160). For Samiti, Bharat Mata symbolizes India's territory and is as caring as lord Parvati (Siva's wife) and as fierce as Durga (Bacchetta, 1993, p. 41). Ashtabhuja also shares similarities with the image of Durga. She is the 'assimilation' of goddess Lakshmi's wealth, Saraswati's intellectual power, and Durga's strength (Sethi, 2002, p. 1551). The goddess carries saffron flags, lotus, and the Gita[84] in her eight hands, representing the characteristics of a proper Hindu woman (Bacchetta, 1993, p. 41). Besides Ashtabhuja and Bharat Mata, the Samiti valorizes Kali[85]. The goddess Kali slays demons, creates chaos, and destabilizes the order (Bacchetta, 1993, p. 45). It is vital to note here that Samiti refashions the image of Kali, focusing solely on her destruction of demons and less on her wrath or anger. Samiti warns about the disadvantages of women possessing extreme power and fury, using such force to oppose their husbands and families, and trying to be equal to men (Sehgal, 2015, p. 83).

Hindu nationalist organizations domesticated warrior goddesses by controlling their untamed, ferocious, erotic aspect (Sehgal, 2015, p. 83). Menon opines that goddesses' fierce, independent

[84] Gita is a Hindu religious text.

[85] The Samiti's retelling of Kali's story shows Kali on a killing spree. She was so drunk that she almost killed her husband, Siva. See Sehgal, M. (2015). Defending the Nation: Militarism, Women's Empowerment, and the Hindu Right. In N. A. Naples & J. B. Mendez (Eds.), *Border Politics: Social Movements, Collective Identities, and Globalization* (p. 83). NYU Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qff82.6 for more information.

entities are controlled and tamed through 'spousification', where the existence of goddesses is defined in terms of wives of male gods (Menon, 2017, Good Mother/Bad Mother). Sen argues that even though there are many aspects of Durga's imagery, the Hindu nationalist project highlights Durga as a devoted wife of Siva (Sen, 2015, Para. 6). Durga takes on the role of a warrior only in case of crisis. She returns to her domestic roles after the problem is over and is not willing to be equal to men in power and ability (Sen, 2015, Para. 6). The figures of goddesses appropriated and used by Hindu nationalists shape the roles and expectations of women within the movement and outside. Hansen argues that the use of iconic figures (religious, historical, and mythological) who have profound power in women's lives has been problematic for feminists who are fighting for empowerment, both in India and abroad, as these figures establish an ideological model of Hindu womanhood (Hansen, 1988, p. WS25).

3.1 PARADIGM OF GODDESS, HINDU WOMEN, AND VIRANGANA IN HINDUTVA

Hindutva upholds the model of a benevolent, controlled Hindu wife. One such example of an ideal wife is Sita, broadly understood in Hindu nationalism as an iconic model of a Hindu wife. She is presented as the epitome of sacrifice, who accepted every command of her husband Ram, even trial by fire[86] (Bacchetta, 2002, p. 165). The message that follows from Sita's representation in the Hindutva narrative is that all Hindu women should be chaste, loyal to their husbands, and protect their reputations (Bacchetta, 2002, p. 165). Karline McLain notes that the Hindutva ideology centered on portraying Ram and Sita as "the moral exemplars of Indian society" (McLain, 2001, p. 32). Sita walks through the fire to show her loyalty and purity toward her husband (Banerjee, 2010, pp. 282-283), who is ultimately abandoned by Ram even after she proves her chastity (McLain, 2001, p. 37). Sita's fire ordeal is widely revered as the ultimate expression of Hindu women's wifely roles, a living example

[86] Trial by fire refers to an incident in the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. In this episode, Sita, who was abducted by the Lanka king Ravana, returns to her husband Ram after he defeats Ravana and rescues her. However, Ram rejects Sita because she lived in Ravana's house during her captivity. Ram asks Sita to prove her fidelity by walking through fire. So, Sita walks on the fire to prove her chastity and fidelity towards her husband. See McLain, K. (2001). Sita and Shurpanakha: Symbols of the Nation in the Amar Chitra Katha. *Manushi*, (122), 32–39, for more information.

of which was eighteen-year-old Roop Kanwar of Deorala, Rajasthan, in 1987, who willingly burned to death on her husband's pyre (Banerjee, 2012, p. 133). Many Hindu nationalist leaders glorified her death as Sati, an act of self-immolation to prove purity by walking onto her husband's funeral pyre as an expression of true *pativrata*[87] ideals (Banerjee, 2012, p. 133). Roop Kanwar was transformed into a symbolic representation of a devoted Hindu wife where "her body, literally, became the space on which Hindu muscular nationalism staked its claim" (Banerjee, 2010, p. 284). Being an upper-caste Rajput, Roop Kanwar was a perfect model of Hindutva's idea of femininity and Hindu women's virtue (Banerjee, 2010, p. 284). In India, figures like Sita, Savitri, and Behula are the epitome of the "epic heroinetype" (Hansen, 1988, p. WS25) and are symbols of loyalty, duty, diligence, and obedience. They are also *pativratas* (dutiful wives). For example, Behula of *Manasamangal*[88] is a well-known figure in West Bengal, India, regarded as a true *pativrata*. However, she did not burn herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Instead, she embarked on a journey to bring back her dead husband. She traveled to the land of God and brought back her husband's life, for which she is endowed with supernatural qualities and is one of the many noteworthy *pativratas* in India. She is offered a "semi-divine status" (Chatterjee, 2000, p. 11) for her morality, virtue, chastity, and devotion (Chatterjee, 2000, pp. 10-12).

Another significant paradigm in Hindutva politics is the goddess imagery as mothers. In this paradigm, the celebrated figures are mostly Kali, Durga, Lakshmi, and Parvati (Lord Siva's wife) (Hansen, 1988, p. WS25). Most of these figures belong to the mainstream Hindu pantheon of goddesses, with no mention of regional goddesses like Manasa and Sitala. Although possessing martial power and challenging patriarchy, the paradigm of mother goddess defines figures like Kali and Durga

[87] *Pativrata* is someone who is devoted to her wifely duties, regards her husband as a deity, and dedicates her life entirely to serving her husband.

[88] *Manasamangal* is one of the *Mangal kavyas* on the goddess Manasa (snake goddess). It is a Bengali medieval literature that consists of poems narrating the story of the goddess Manasa attaining her status as a Hindu goddess. Behula is a significant character in *Manasamangal*, who saves her husband. See Chatterjee, R. (2000). Representation of Gender in Folk Paintings of Bengal. *Social Scientist*, *28*(3/4), 7–21, https://doi.org/10.2307/3518186 for more information.

in relation to their male gods, highlighting their motherly, wifely, and nurturing qualities. This paradigm of mother goddesses aligns with Hindutva organizations like the Samiti's vision of women who are expected to maintain a balance between duties towards family and nation. Hindu nationalism has appropriated these paradigms of *pativratas* (dutiful wives) and ideal mothers to lay down specific roles for women based on which their participation is designed in the Hindutva movement. Through these models, Hindu nationalist discourse continued spreading an idea of Hindu womanhood that worked to the advantage of Hindutva politics.

Other than the goddesses, Jijabai, Lakshmibai, and Ahilyabai are some of the most prominent historical figures that are co-opted by the Hindu nationalists, all Hindu upper caste queens and princesses. These figures have been used before during the Indian nationalist movement as *Viranganas* to bring the patriotic fervor in men and women. According to Urvi Mukhopadhyay (2014), the *Virangana* model was a popular paradigm during the nineteenth century with the coming of nationalism, which selectively evoked memories of historical and mythical figures. The model also included figures like Sita and Savitri, known for their sacrificial nature, and historical female figures like Lakshmibai and Jijabai, known for their multifaceted qualities (Mukhopadhyay, 2014). This *Virangana* model was necessary during the nationalist movement as it challenged the British notion of Indian women's degrading condition in Indian society and the need to save them from Indian men (Mukhopadhyay, 2014).

Razia Sultana was also a part of the *Virangana* paradigm in the nationalist movement in India (Hansen, 1988; Mukhopadhyay, 2014). Unlike other characters, Razia Sultana (Razia) was a non-Hindu figure. Razia (Razia Bint Iltutmish) ruled from 1236 to 1240 CE, and she is remembered not only for her exceptional martial qualities but also as a ruler (Mukhopadhyay, 2014, p. 103). Razia, dressed in male attire, was well-versed in state affairs, politics, and administration and ruled the empire in Delhi, India (Mukhopadhyay, 2014, pp. 104-106; Hansen, 1988). It was her qualities as a true ruler, a multifaceted woman, and her martial abilities that made her a popular *Virangana* figure (Hansen,

1988, p. WS26). The *Virangana* model is not like the simple category of mother or warrior goddess figures. It is a paradigm that is more complex and breaks the normative gender norms. The paradigm is a 'paradox' (Hansen, 1988, WS26) to the Brahmanical patriarchal idea of Hindu womanhood. The model signifies bravery, power, women fighting on the battlefield, women as leaders, as rulers, as having authority and wisdom (Hansen, 1988). However, this model was changed in the Hindu nationalist politics when the discourse selectively co-opted the *Virangana* narrative to shape Hindu women's identity and participation in the movement.

Hindu nationalists re-imagined and appropriated the *Virangana* model, creating an image of the Hindu woman who has warrior skills like Durga and Lakshmibai, but not devoid of the motherly and virtuous qualities. Hindutva's co-optation of the *Virangana* model includes only Hindu, upper-caste *Virangana* figures, mostly Jijabai, Lakshmibai, and Ahilyabai as model Hindu women. When I say Hindutva nationalists' reimagined the *Virangana* model, I refer to the erasure of non-Hindu figures like Razia Sultana and the complex and at times transgressive portrayal of *Viranganas* during the nationalist period that are now typecast into singular categories, the warrior and the mother type. Although the original conception of the *Virangana* paradigm consisted of the historical figures like Jijabai as the epitome of chastity, devotion, and motherhood that support the patriarchal construction of women, figures like Rani Lakshmibai, Ahilyabai, and Razia are known for their actions and works that often challenge the patriarchal models of gender norms.

Ahilyabai Holkar, born in 1725 A.D. and married at the age of eight to the only heir of Malhar Rao Holkar in 1733 A.D, was known as an efficient administrator and lauded for her qualities as a ruler (Nagrale, 1979, p. 700). She did not commit Sati after her husband died and ruled Maharashtra from 1765 to 1795 A.D. (Hansen, 1988; Nagrale, 1979). Similarly, Lakshmibai is another historical warrior queen of Jhansi who did not live the traditional life of a widow after her husband died. She was a fighter, a ruler, a patriot who fought against British rule (Hansen, 1988). However, when these figures are co-opted and re-imagined in the Hindutva narrative, they are either given a divine status or

are glorified in ways that highlight qualities that go well with normative gender roles. Ahilyabai Holkar appears on Samiti's website as a divine figure, and nothing is mentioned about her administrative power or intellectual qualities (Rashtra Sevika Samiti, 2025, n.d.). Jijabai is visualised as possessing the supreme qualities of motherhood. She raised her son Shivaji with Hindu ideals and traditions (Rashtra Sevika Samiti, 2025, n.d.). One of the articles of the magazine, *Hindu Vishwa Issue* by Vishwa Hindu Parishad (Vishva Hindu Parishad, 2021, n.d.) describes Jijabai as "*ek eisi prakhar sahansil aur mahatwakankhi putra ko Jijabai ne Janam diya, jo Maratha samrajya evang akhanda bharat ka sarvosreshtha samrat bana*[89]" (Singh, 2023, p.11), highlighting Jijabai's motherly qualities.

The portrayal of Jijabai as a mother of an ideal Hindu son fits the Hindutva narrative of women's roles as mothers within and outside the movement, as traditional roles are deeply valued in the discourse. However, Kalyani Devaki Menon argues that figures like Jijabai also provide an 'alternative' understanding of women's position in the Hindutva movement (Menon, 2005, p. 105; Menon, 2001, p. 25). Despite the strong presence of goddesses and female historical figures in Hindutva discourse, male mythical-historical figures like Ram and Shivaji, idolised by RSS and VHP, get preponderance as the face of Hindutva politics. In this regard, Menon argues that the presence of Jijabai in women's organizations like the Samiti creates a space where women see themselves as "historical agents" who are active participants in challenging any form of violence against them (Menon, 2005, p. 108). In that sense, Lakshmibai, Ahilyabai, and Sita, most of the mythical-historical female icons present in Hindutva politics, have projected an "alternative subjectivity" (Menon, 2001, p. 25; Menon, 2005) for women where it is women who are powerful, primary agents of the movement compared to men. Similarly, Durga, Kali, and Ashtabhuja are lauded as protectors who save the nation

[89] Translation: "Jijabai gave birth to such a strong, tolerant, and ambitious son, who became the best emperor of the Maratha Empire and India". This quote is cited from the magazine, Hindu Vishwa Issue, published online by Vishwa Hindu Parishad on their website https://www.vhp.org/. The article, Singh, N. (2023, June 1–15). Shivaji Aur Nari Samman. *Hindu Vishwa Issue*, p. 11, published in the June issue of the magazine, mentions Jijabai in reference to the Maratha king Shivaji.

from the hands of demons. These goddess figures present women's participation as equally significant as men in the Hindutva movement.

Through the stories of Jijabai, Lakshmibai, and Ahilyabai, women draw a sense of equality in their roles in the Hindutva movement. The shifting subjectivity of women's roles from passive to primary agents in Hindutva politics is visible in speeches of women leaders like Sadhvi Rithambara and Uma Bharti. For instance, in one of the speeches, Rithambara directly attacks Hindu men's masculinity, saying, "If you do not awaken, cows will be slaughtered everywhere. You will be responsible for these catastrophes, for history will say, Hindus were cowards." (Sethi, 2002, p. 1551; Pal, n.d.).

However, the representations that Hindutva discourse promotes support Brahmanical patriarchal gender models. The emphasis on traditional gender roles in the appropriation of goddesses, the *Virangana* model, and historical figures ultimately does not create 'dissonance' (Menon, 2001, p. 25) with the kind of 'female subjectivity' (Menon, 2001, p. 25) that Hindutva politics employs for women both within and outside the movement. The new model of Hindu womanhood, which is the militant, warrior type created by Hindutva politics, gave women more autonomy in the movement, but this did not negate the traditionally celebrated idea of women as breeders, victims, mothers, and wives, which remain an important part of women's roles in Hindutva politics. The autonomy that women enjoy as militants is also limited as long as women take up the militant role for the benefit of Hindutva politics.

3.2 WOMEN AS GODDESSES

Another problematic aspect in Hindutva's narrative of female heroes is the deification of mythical-historical figures and the equating of ordinary women with goddesses. Deification provides a sense of divine authority to women when patriarchy forges a link between goddesses and ordinary women by projecting ordinary women as deities. However, the question remains regarding how the divine

authority is exercised in subverting traditional gender roles and patriarchy, or whether it is overburdening women into emulating goddesses as role models. Hiltebeitel and Erndl write that there is a "common feminine nature" (Hiltebeitel & Erndl, 2000, p. 11) because of which women are seen as expressions of goddesses (Hiltebeitel & Erndl, 2000). However, the authors rightly argue, " the existence of the Hindu Goddess has not appeared outwardly to have benefitted women's position in Indian society." (Hiltebeitel & Erndl, 2000, p. 11). The goddess representations that Hindutva promotes are written, narrated, and constructed by men, limiting goddesses' representation to a point that supports the ideal qualities of a Hindu woman. In this representation, the voices of the goddesses are marginalized, as are the voices of women from different castes, classes, and communities who worship goddesses in various forms.

The deification of women as goddesses is a way of maintaining the age-old Brahmanical patriarchal structures. The deification leads to validating practices that conform to patriarchy. Ali Smears writes that when women are deified as goddesses, they are placed on a pedestal, and if they fail, they are not respected (Smears, 2019, p. 7). It is a well-known trope used by the patriarchy and has little to do with empowering women (Ganguly, 2024, para 3). When women are visualized as goddesses, they are expected to maintain an image of purity and chastity, and they cannot fail. Hindutva discourse glorifying women as goddesses is about maintaining patriarchal standards. Such glorification endorses a 'bad' woman /' good' woman image, based on which society measures women's value. The newspaper article by Sudha G Tilak quotes Prof. Brinda Bose criticizing the deification model, saying:

> Why is she Durga/Saraswati/Lakshmi and not Kali, whose nude monstrosity makes genteel society squeamish at the best of times? If she was a slut/monster, would she be worthy of being

saved in society's terms? And why does she need to be 'saved', in that most patriarchal rhetoric? (Tilak, 2013)[90]

Durga, Kali, Parvati, and all the goddess imagery, along with the mythical-historical figures, come together in Hindutva politics to validate and uphold the traditional gender hierarchy. The highlight is their traditional roles as virtuous wives and mothers. Bharat Mata is an amalgamation of Hindu goddesses like Durga and Kali. She is not an independent deity possessing unlimited power. Her power representations are controlled by men who sometimes portray her as a mother, as a victim, as an attractive figure, and as a goddess based on their needs. Most of the goddesses revered in Hindutva are not represented as independent goddesses worshipped in their own right. For instance, Durga assumed greater prominence in Hindutva discourse because she is a mother and wife of Siva, and not only a warrior figure. When women are deified as goddesses, for example, Durga Vahini's visualization of women as Durgas, it is not about emulating the goddess's power to challenge patriarchy but instead maintaining an image that Hindutva politicians want women to uphold.

3.3 CASTE AND SAFFRONIZATION IN HINDUTVA

There is a caste aspect in Hindutva discourse representation of goddesses and other mythical-historical figures. Most of these figures, whether Jijabai or Lakshmibai, fit the image of the chaste, domesticated, upper-caste Hindu woman stereotype. When it comes to goddesses, such as Durga, Lakshmi, and Bharat Mata, they are all fair-complexioned, fully clothed, docile, domesticated goddesses (Ganguly, 2024). The representations marginalize women who are outside the upper-caste, middle-class, elite, fair-skinned Hindu woman model -that is, the Dalits, lower-caste women, and indigenous women (Ganguly, 2024). Based on the intersectional feminist framework, these representations serve to

[90] Quote taken from the news article in Al Jazeera. See Tilak, S. G. (2013, October 10). 'Bruised goddesses' hurt Indian feminists. *Al Jazeera.* https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2013/10/10/bruised-goddesses-hurt-indian-feminists/ for more information.

maintain "politically-charged, normative imaginings" (Smears, 2019, p. 1) of Hindu women that the Hindutva discourse has constructed.

Sumathi Ramaswamy (2010) argues that the modern representations of Bharat Mata point to "the (unnatural) fairness of her complexion" (Ramaswamy, 2010, p. 57), which produces an elitist portrayal of the goddess as an upper-caste Hindu woman (Ganguly, 2024, para. 7). The fair-skinned Bharat Mata has minimal connection with the diverse skin colors, caste, class groups that constitute India (Ganguly, 2024). Menon (2017) criticizes the elitist, homogeneous, fair imagery of Bharat Mata of Hindutva politics and highlights a dusky, rural, skinny figure of Bharat Mata with a buffalo that resembles the Dalit and indigenous women of India, challenging the caste aspect in Hindutva's portrayal. Menon argues that Hindutva groups like RSS create a "savarna[91]-directed" (Menon,2017, Good mother/Bad Mother) portrayal of goddesses, which does not reflect the practices and cultures of lower-caste and indigenous populations.

Rajan (2000), while discussing the literary representation of goddesses, argues that goddesses are not represented equally in writings, specifically the folk goddesses or the goddesses worshipped by different indigenous groups, Dalits, and lower-caste communities. In the Hindutva narrative, there are also hardly any regional or folk goddesses who represent the lower caste, indigenous, or Dalit population with diverse worship traditions. By popularising an upper-caste understanding of goddesses in Hindutva's dominant narrative, the regional goddesses are marginalized. The dominant North Indian upper-caste narrative of goddesses under Hindu nationalism also excludes the complexity in the imagination of the divine feminine and positions Hindu goddesses as symbols of upper-caste, upper-class, elite Hindus.

Kancha Ilaiah (1996) critiques Hindutva ideology by comparing Dalit gods and goddesses with Brahmanical Hindu gods and goddesses supported by Hindutva politics. Ilaiah mentions that Hindu mainstream goddesses like Sita and Saraswati are domesticated and defined as wives of male gods

[91] Savarna means upper-caste.

based on Brahmanical Hinduism. He cites the example of the Dalitbahujan goddess Pochammna, who transgresses the gender boundary (Tharu, 1996; Ilaiah, 1996, pp. 92–94). Pochamma breaks the boundaries of caste, class, gender, and religion and challenges the Brahmanical way of worshipping goddess figures. She is a regional goddess worshipped by all castes except the Brahmins and the merchant class in Andhra Pradesh, India (Ilaiah, 1996). There is no concept of a priest in the worship of Pochamma. She is the mother of all Dalitbahujan communities (Ilaiah, 1996, pp. 92-94). Ilaiah (1996) defines Pochamma, stating,

> Unlike Sita, her gender role is not specified. Nobody knows about Pochamma's husband. Nobody considers her inferior or useless because she does not have a husband. The contrast between Saraswathi and Lakshmi, on the one hand, and Pochamma on the other, is striking. Pochamma is independent. (1996, p. 92)

Ilaiah criticizes Hindutva's Brahmanical concept of gods and goddesses to spread communal hatred and to build a sense of Brahmanical Hindu supremacy over other groups of society, citing the goddess Pochamma, who, unlike Ram, is not institutionalized as people from all castes and classes can visit her (Ilaiah, 1996). Pochamma does not believe in any religious divisions, leading to productive practices that help communities grow (Ilaiah, 1996, pp. 91-93). Goddesses like Pochamma stand in sharp contrast to Hindutva nationalists' idolization of Brahmanical gods, goddesses, and upper-caste Hindu heroines in their Hindu supremacist rewriting of India's history. However, it is important to note that the presence of goddesses such as Pochamma does not necessarily indicate gender equality or women's empowerment in the lives of Dalitbahujan women.

There is a saffronization of goddess imagery and other mythical-historical female characters in the Hindutva discourse (Ganguly, 2024). According to Jaffrelot, with the coming of Hindutva, there is a "saffronisation of the public sphere" (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018, p. 479) where secularism is compromised, and Hindutva ideology assumes a dominant role. As a political project, Hindutva politics normalized the marginalization of non-Hindu communities, and those supporting secularism

are labeled as ‘anti-national’ (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018, p. 480). Under Hindu nationalism, there is 'Hinduisation' (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018, p. 479) of names of roads, buildings, bridges, places, and normalization of calling India 'Bharat' (Anderson & Jaffrelot, 2018, p. 479). Similarly, there is a saffronization of goddesses, like Bharat Mata, who were previously understood as symbols of Indian territory, now used as symbols of an imaginary Hindu nation (Ganguly, 2024). She is the mother of the Hindu population, who are under threat of Muslim dominance. She carries the saffron flag of Hindutva and is a symbol of the Hindu nationalist movement.

3.4 FEMINIST USE OF GODDESS AS EMPOWERING

Feminist and women's rights campaigns have also utilized goddesses, but they differ from Hindutva's appropriation of these deities. Campaigns like “Abused Goddesses” by Taproot India in 2011 were created to generate awareness of violence against women (Vemuri, 2021). The campaign used the imagery of Durga, Lakshmi, and Saraswati with their bruised faces (Vemuri, 2021, p. 84). Another is the comic book, *Priya's Shakti*, created by Ram Devineni to address gender-based violence. It is the first comic book in India that uses "augmented reality technology"[92] (Bhalla, 2014). In this comic book, Priya is a gang rape survivor who, after meeting Parvati, assumes superhero powers and avenges herself (Bhalla, 2014). Priya also helps other women who are victims of such crimes to find justice (Bhalla, 2014). The comic was created keeping in mind that women victims do not get justice because of cultural pressure and social stigma in India, which undermines women's fight to pursue justice (Bhalla, 2014). *Priya's Shakti* falls in line with Indian feminists' appropriation of goddesses that speak about dismantling patriarchy and empowering women.

Rajan (2000; 1998) traces the Indian feminists' appropriation of goddesses, discussing the Indian women's movement in the 1970s, utilizing traditional Hindu figures to evoke the concept of

[92] See Bhalla, N. (2014, December 17). Rape survivor turns 'superhero' in India's first digital comic. *Reuters*, https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN0JV23U/ for more information.

"*stri shakti"* or the feminine power and draw attention to issues concerning women (Rajan, 2000, p. 275; 1998, p. WS-36). Erndl notes that contemporary Indian feminists appropriate shakti[93] (power) and goddesses in ways that are "spiritually and socially liberating for women" (Erndl, 2000, p. 97). Erndl cites the example of Abha Bhaiya, a feminist and a director of Jagori, a women's development center in Delhi, India, who explored goddesses and women in spiritual and religious paths to search for inspirational women figures that she can include in her work and draw inspiration from in her personal life (Erndl, 2000, pp. 97-98).

Manushi, a journal founded by Madhu Kishwar, is another example of feminist appropriation of goddesses and religious figures in response to women's societal issues. *Manushi* promotes a "feminine principle in humanity" (Manushi, 2025, n.d.)[94]. *Manushi* speaks about a wide range of issues, including women's rights, gender, religion, politics, and identity (Manushi, 2025, n.d.). The journal includes articles on devotional female figures, goddesses, and mythological figures to frame its own connection to feminism, rooted in the diverse cultural and religious landscape of India. The reason that *Manushi's* appropriation of the goddess is closer to the grassroots understanding of feminism is to be more inclusive in its approach towards Indian women who are religious (Manushi, 2025, n.d.). *Kali for Women*, the first feminist publishing house in India (Rajan, 1998), was founded in 1984 by Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon (Zubaan, 2019, n.d.)[95]. *Kali for Women* drew its name from the most popular goddess, Kali, publishing academic and activist books, fiction books, and writings on gender and feminism in the South Asian context (Zubaan, 2019, n.d.).

Indian feminists appropriated goddesses in a way that addressed issues fundamental to feminist ideas about women's rights, equality, liberation, and empowerment. The appropriations are based on grassroots and regional interpretations of goddess figures. The campaigns address social issues and

[93] Although the literal meaning is power, the term denotes more the divine feminine power.
[94] Cited from the website of Manushi. See https://www.manushi.in/ for more information.

[95] Cited from the website of Zubaan Book. See https://zubaanbooks.com/ for more information.

violence against women in India. Organizations like *Manushi* and *Kali for Women* appropriate goddesses to promote an intersectional view of women's issues, challenging patriarchy, caste, class, religious fundamentalism, and gender discrimination.

3.5 CO-OPTATION OF FEMINISM IN HINDUTVA

Interestingly, Hindutva, in its appropriation of Hindu goddesses, created its own "brand of feminism" (Ganguly, 2024, para 4), what Rajan calls "Hindutva feminism" (Rajan, 2000, p. 275; 1998, p. WS36), by which the author implies that Hindutva nationalists have co-opted deliberately certain "progressive elements" (Rajan, 2000, p. 281) to appear liberal and attract women from all sections of society in their movement. This also includes incorporating specific feminist ideas or concepts into the discourse, like ideas of women's equality and women's empowerment. Right-wing women's organizations like Durga Vahini or the Samiti speak about women's empowerment by endorsing words like women's power and liberation. According to Nandita Banerjee Dhawan (2017), women's right-wing organizations co-opted the language of feminism in speaking about women's development, economic freedom, education, and women's oppression (Dhawan, 2017, pp.505-507; Ganguly, 2024). Interestingly, Hindutva organizations do not support the feminist idea of empowerment as they think it is harmful to the Hindu society, motivating women towards a false sense of liberation and destroying the Hindu family structure and Hindu values (Dhawan, 2017, p. 506; Ganguly, 2024). According to Dhawan, the strategy of emulation of feminism by Hindutva organizations aligns with what Christophe Jaffrelot calls a "strategy of stigmatisation and emulation of 'threatening Others'" (Jaffrelot, 2016, p. 18; Dhawan, 2017).

The Hindutva movement promotes women's rights and equality to broaden its appeal to women and to the global community. It is a strategy to align with the global trend on gender and development. Hindutva women leaders and members are encouraged to follow the goddesses' footsteps, emulate the goddesses' strength, and advocate for women's rights, education, and equality in all spheres. For

instance, Paola Bacchetta shows how Kamlabehn, an active Samiti member, emulates Kali, saying, "Did Kali fight the *rakshasas*[96] with her hands? All our goddesses are armed. Why should I not be armed?" (Bacchetta, 1993, p. 46; Pal, n.d.). Kamlabehn follows Kali's depiction in *Devi Mahatmya*, where she kills the demons with weapons and assumes an aggressive, violent appearance (Bacchetta, 1993). This emulation of Kali confirms the militant and violent role women play in the Hindutva movement, which feminists oppose. Such emulation promotes Hindutva ideology and not women's empowerment. The emulation of Kali by women in Hindutva politics justifies communal violence against minority groups in India (Banerjee, 1996, pp. 1214-1215). The emulation of Kali's strength by women leaders of Hindutva has given rise to figures like Uma Bharti, Pragya Thakur, and Sadhvi Rithambara, who rationalize their xenophobic sentiments and ethnocentrism in upholding majoritarian rule under the BJP government. Kali's appropriation in Hindutva discourse, legitimizing the militant activism of women in Hindutva politics, raises the question: Does women's role in violent political protest equal women's empowerment? (Rajan, 1998, pp. WS36-37; Omvedt, 1993).

Hindutva nationalists' reconfiguration of goddess imagery supports the Brahmanical Hindu tradition. Brahmanical Hindu tradition perceives women's sexuality as an expression of shakti (power) (Smears, 2019). However, women's unlimited freedom over sexual expression is understood as problematic, as this would grant women power to have sexual relationships outside their caste (Smears, 2019, p. 2). That is why Brahmanical tradition supports patriarchal ideas of marriage and family that will control women's sexuality, thereby controlling women's power (Smears, 2019). The narrative of goddesses under Hindu nationalism celebrates the valiant power and strength of Durga, Kali, and Ashtabhuja. However, there is a constant tension within Hindutva organisations regarding women possessing excessive power comparable to men and having authority over their sexuality, bodies, and lives (Ganguly, 2024).

[96]Demons.

Traditional roles such as mother and wife are valued and supported by Hindutva organizations because they help maintain control. Hindutva discourse does not depict the goddess in the same way that feminist appropriations do, which often present goddesses as symbols challenging Brahminical patriarchal orders and caste hierarchies. Hindutva's narrative of goddesses aims to ensure that women's power does not challenge societal structures. Hindu nationalists portray women as repositories of the goddesses' powers. However, such an association of women with goddesses does not subvert gender stereotypes, alter Brahmanical patriarchy, and empower women across all castes, classes, and ethnicities. Hindu nationalists tap into widely revered imagery of benevolent goddesses, such as Sita, and warrior goddesses, like Kali and Durga, to mobilize women around the Hindutva cause. Through the co-optation of goddesses and words like women's power, Hindu nationalists create a space where women feel a sense of authority, empowerment, and belongingness (Ganguly, 2024). However, it remains unclear what this empowerment means for women's role in Hindutva politics, the Hindu nation, and their position based on caste, class, gender, and ethnicity in a broader patriarchal society (Ganguly, 2024).

3.6 ANALYZING HINDUTVA'S MODELS OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

There are specific roles suggested for women by Hindu nationalist organizations. Women enter as warriors, wives, mothers, and renouncers. Additionally, women serve as "border guards" (Banerjee, 2010, p. 273), with their bodies symbolizing boundaries that separate the Hindu nation from the Muslims (Banerjee, 2010). This boundary is reinforced through the depiction of women as pure and chaste Hindu women (Banerjee, 2010, p. 273). The authority, however, rests with men who regulate Hindu women's behavior, dress code, and sexuality to preserve their image as both an ideal Hindu woman and as part of the Hindutva movement.

Besides symbolizing the honor of the Hindu nation, women also take on activist-oriented roles. Banerjee uses the term "citizen warriors", a model in which Hindu women embrace 'masculine'

attributes like learning to use weapons and martial skills but not necessarily questioning male domination or patriarchal gender roles (Banerjee, 2003, p. 175). In this warrior model, women's right-wing organizations focus on following warrior goddesses like Kali, Durga, and Ashtabhuja, as well as historical figures like Rani Lakshmibai. Women are taught how to use weapons to defend themselves and their nation against enemies (Banerjee, 2003). However, whether in traditional roles as mothers, wives, and as chaste Hindu women or in warrior roles, women's strength remains confined within the boundaries of Hindutva organizations. Women's right-wing groups like Samiti and Durga Vahini reinforce Hindu values and traditional gender roles, ultimately upholding Brahminical patriarchy through their portrayal of Hindu goddesses.

The ascetic, celibate, or the sadhvi model of participation in Hindutva politics has influential leaders like Sadhvi Rithambara, Uma Bharti, and Pragya Thakur. Banerjee notes that these women ascetics do not necessarily take up arms or train themselves in self-defence, but the power resides in their speeches (Banerjee, 2003, p. 176). The image of celibate, ascetic women leaders in the Hindutva movement is not a tolerant, non-violent image. They assume a more aggressive role, using provocative words to shame Hindu men for their weak character (Banerjee, 2003, pp. 176-177). There are several notable points to consider in this model of celibate, ascetic female leaders of Hindutva politics. The female ascetics enter the terrain of masculine Hindu nationalism in ways not traditionally prescribed for Hindu women as they renounce marriage, motherhood, and family life. Their 'renunciation' gives them a "moral force" and spiritual authority (Basu, 1993, p.27). The role of ascetics can be viewed as an empowering model, as women can enter as equal participants in the masculine space of Hindutva politics without assuming passive roles as mothers or ideal wives.

Asceticism has been a difficult path for women as it negates the concept of marriage, family, and traditional gender roles. Bevilacqua notes that asceticism for women is not socially acceptable, as it calls for 'self-determination' (Bevilacqua, 2017, p. 53), which goes against the usual gender roles that women perform in a Brahmanical patriarchal order, where men dominate society (Bevilacqua,

2017, p. 53). According to Dasgupta, the reason behind the absence of women ascetics in India's history is the social and cultural norms that limit women's paths as renouncers (Dasgupta, 2023, p. 2). However, there are instances of female ascetics who have broken the chains of patriarchy and transgressed gender boundaries. One of them is the 15th-century medieval historical figure Mirabai of Rajasthan, India[97], who broke the chains of patriarchy for her love for Krishna by renouncing marriage, family, and her royal position as a queen at a time when society was more rigid and fixed (Biswas, 2019). She broke the boundaries of caste, class, and gender and was a religious revolutionary who paved the way for future female ascetics to follow her path of piety (Biswas, 2019).

The ascetic model in Hindutva politics enabled women, including those from lower caste groups, to join beyond normative roles in a deeply elitist, upper-caste movement. Uma Bharti is a notable example of someone from a lower caste who joined the BJP (Dhawan, 2017). Dhawan notes that Hindutva organizations like RSS have always attracted people from upper-caste Hindu families for following Brahmanical culture and supporting the supremacy of Brahmins (Dhawan, 2017, pp. 498-499). The inclusion of female politicians like Uma Bharti is not a message towards a casteless political agenda. Hindutva appropriated the lower caste identity of Uma Bharti for election purposes in Madhya Pradesh and used her ascetic image to draw sympathy for the Babri Masjid demolition movement (Dhawan, 2017, p. 502). The incorporation of lower-caste politician Uma Bharti conceals the upper-caste nature of Hindutva politics (Dhawan, 2017, p. 505).

Hindu-Right women leaders like Sadhvi Rithambara, Uma Bharti, and, in recent times, Pragya Singh Thakur have played crucial roles in shaping the movement. They all use examples of goddesses to attract women to aggressive, militant activities without upsetting the model of Hindu womanhood (Dasgupta, 2023, p. 13). The sadhvis (ascetics) are a vital instrument of Hindutva in spreading violence

[97] Mirabai was a 15th-century devotional figure of Rajasthan, India. See Biswas, S. (2019). Mirabai in history and in the contemporary narratives of women in Rajasthan. In S. Mukherjee & P. S. Salter (Eds.), *History and collective memory from the margins: A global perspective* (pp. 125-142). Nova Science Publishers for more information.

and communal unrest, supporting an extreme fundamentalist ideology. For example, Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur believes in extremist Hindu nationalist ideology and has been accused of copying Islamic extremist ideas to create communal tension in India (Dasgupta, 2023, p. 11).

It is important not to overlook the limited view of women's empowerment presented through ascetics and prominent Hindutva women leaders, as Hindutva's notion of empowerment does not aim to tackle the real issues women face or question Brahmanical patriarchal systems. In Hindutva politics, if I broadly examine women's participation, either they enter as female ascetics, renouncing everything so that their femininity and sexuality are erased, or they join in more traditional roles as mothers and wives (Banerjee, 2003, p. 178). In both cases, the position of women as independent sexual beings, liberated individuals, entering Hindutva politics, remains complicated and debatable. The image of the sadhvi or ascetic in Hindutva politics is an extension of the patriarchal Hindutva ideology. The sadhvis do not reject the institution of marriage, gendered stereotypes, and male-dominated family structure, nor encourage women to follow the path of complete renunciation. The sadhvis use similar gendered stereotypes of Hindu male physical strength and Hindu women's purity as the symbolic representation of the Hindu nation, encouraging traditional models of womanhood and motherhood.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I aimed to highlight how the goddess imagery in Hindutva discourse creates a homogenous, domesticated, and stereotype-driven notion of Hindu goddesses. This notion reflects elitism and upper-caste understanding and supports Brahminical patriarchal gender roles, benefiting the hegemonic, majoritarian Hindutva ideology. Through a critical examination of the websites of Hindutva organizations, I discussed how these organizations glorify goddesses and use these models to construct a notion of Hindu womanhood that they want women both within and outside the Hindutva movement to emulate. I also showed that the monolithic, dominant narrative of goddesses in Hindutva

politics marginalizes the alternative, intersectional understandings of goddesses that vary based on caste, gender, class, region, and ethnicity. Through the saffronization of Bharat Mata and other goddess imagery, Hindutva nationalists create a linear narrative of the complex concept of the divine feminine, depicting her as a saffron-clad female deity fighting for Hindutva's cause with a saffron flag.

The glorification of goddesses and their relationship with women's roles within the Hindutva movement convey a sense of empowerment, which I argued in this chapter as presenting a limited notion of women's empowerment. The empowerment promoted by the Hindutva goddess narrative does not question the multiple ways Brahmanical patriarchy operates through caste, class, gender, religion, and ethnicity in creating barriers for women.

Cecilia M.B. Sardenberg highlights the distinction in the feminist view of women's empowerment, noting that it is a "process by which women attain autonomy and self-determination, as well as an instrument for the eradication of patriarchy, a means and an end in itself" (Sardenberg, 2008, p. 19). Women's empowerment involves structural reforms that challenge patriarchy and gender stereotypes. It must address inequalities rooted in class, caste, religion, and ethnicity, as these factors impact women differently. Thomas Blom Hansen argues that both the RSS and the Samiti are opposed to the notion of independent women, as it undermines family structure and encourages excessive independence (Hansen, 1995, pp. 85–86). Hindutva women's organizations promote active militant roles for women, envisioning them as Durga while simultaneously emphasizing Hindu womanhood to deter women from becoming too career-oriented or seeking individual freedom.

Hindutva ideology has always upheld the supremacy of women as mothers, which is central to Hindutva nationalism (Ganneri, 2005, p. 15). It is evident in the admiration of goddesses like Durga and Bharat Mata as nurturing mothers by Hindutva organizations. The empowering model that Hindutva discourse promotes is a "controlled emancipation" (Hansen, 1995, p. 85), which is ensured by forming an "institutional patriarchy" (Hansen, 1995, p. 86) within the movement. By institutional

patriarchy, Hansen suggests that male organizations, such as the RSS and VHP, control women-led organizations and define women's roles within the *Sangh Parivar*[98] family (Hansen, 1995, p. 90).

Nevertheless, the presence of goddesses in the Hindutva discourse plays a significant role in women's participation in the movement. Despite the lack of a genuine connection to women's issues, Hindutva groups celebrate feminine virtues, bravery, and strength through mythical-historical figures like Ahilyabai and Lakshmibai, as well as goddesses like Kali, Durga, and Astabhuja. By eulogizing these female figures and goddesses, women's right-wing organizations carve out a significant role within the Hindutva movement for themselves. The goddess figures, eulogized by the Samiti and Durga Vahini, provide a separate set of role models for women in a male-dominated Hindu nationalist politics, emphasizing female icons over the more imposing figures of Ram and Shivaji.

It is not new for goddesses to be used in mainstream politics to foster unity and attract the masses. However, one must be careful about the images that are propagated or promoted by invoking the goddesses. The imagery of goddesses in Hindutva discourse reinforces the superiority of the Brahmanical Hindu model over other regional interpretations of goddesses. Before exploring women's oral accounts of goddesses, in chapters 5 and 6, I discuss in the next chapter, Chapter 4, the goddess representation in the 6th-century Sanskrit scripture *Devi Mahatmya*, which is an authoritative text on goddess tradition in India and a reference source from which Hindutva organizations have drawn images of goddesses. The goal is to examine the depiction of goddesses in *Devi Mahatmya* to demonstrate how diverse, complex, and empowering the imagery is, in contrast to the stereotypical representations presented by Hindutva discourse.

[98] An umbrella term for all the Hindu organizations and political parties.

CHAPTER FOUR: REPRESENTATION OF GODDESSES IN THE DEVI MAHATMYA

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I examined how Hindutva nationalists employ a homogenous, stereotypical narrative of Hindu goddesses to construct a model of Hindu womanhood and to validate the militant roles performed by women within the movement. I discussed the cooptation of figures such as Durga, Kali, Sita, and Bharat Mata, along with the Ashtabhuja figure in the Samiti, to promote the goal of a Hindu nation. Ashtabhuja is not a mainstream Hindu deity. It is a creation of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti. While Durga, Kali, and Sita are popular across Hindu rights organizations, Ashtabhuja holds a significant place among Hindutva's women's wing, conveying the power and strength of women in Hindutva politics.

Hindutva's strategy of co-opting goddesses has helped the movement gain women's active participation. But this cooptation has also supported Brahmanical patriarchy and the glorification of a narrow, casteist, elite image of Hindu goddesses and Hindu women. Hindutva nationalists' idea of the Hindu woman includes primarily upper caste, middle-class women, and not the lower caste, Dalit, and indigenous women of India. The dominant portrayal of goddesses in Hindutva discourse marginalized the multiple regional and local variations in goddess representations in India, which vary based on caste, class, ethnicity, region, and gender. This raises the question of whether goddesses have always been visualized within a homogeneous, patriarchal lens where they are domesticated and understood linearly, as seen in the Hindutva narrative. It is in this context that I examine in this chapter the goddess imagery in the text, *Devi Mahatmya*[99] (DM), which is considered the first independent text on

[99] I have referred to the text also as DM in my research.

goddesses that discusses goddess worship culture and their representations within the Hindu religious tradition. The text comprises various stories about the goddesses, the multiple forms of the divine feminine, and is recited in India during festivals like Kali or Durga Puja (worship).

In this chapter, I turn to the foundational text, DM, to examine goddess imagery through an intersectional feminist lens after discussing the instrumentalization of goddess iconography under Hindu nationalism. First, I analyze the multiple representations of goddesses in the text, which reflect the varying caste, class, regional, and ethnic understandings of the goddess. These diverse representations serve as a counter-narrative to Hindutva politics and highlight the pluralism within the goddess tradition through DM's inclusion of regional perspectives. Second, I examine the empowering aspects of goddess representations in DM that challenge Brahminical patriarchal notions and the domestication of goddesses seen in Hindutva's dominant narrative. Together, these two points show how ancient representations of goddesses in DM differ from the contemporary portrayals promoted by Hindutva nationalists. The analysis conveys how complex, ambiguous, and nuanced the imagination of the divine feminine is, rather than the narrow portrayal of goddess figures under Hindutva politics. For my analysis, I have consulted translation works by F. Eden Pargiter (1904) and Thomas Coburn (1992) as my primary source. However, I have mainly cited from Pargiter's (1904) translation and some verses from Coburn's (1992) translation.

Before exploring DM's representation of goddesses, I will briefly discuss the evolution of goddess tradition in the Hindu religious tradition. Hindutva's narrative of goddesses did not lead to the domestication of the goddess figure. Instead, Hindutva discourse co-opted the domesticated version, which is part of the history of goddess evolution under Vaishnava religious belief and Brahmanical Hinduism tradition.

EVOLUTION OF GODDESSES IN INDIA

The goddess worship tradition, if geographically located, has been most popular in Bengal and Assam, a tradition that can be traced back to the ancient period that existed before the "Vedic-Brahmanical tradition" (Chatterjee, 2013, p. 1438). Initially, goddesses were imagined as ferocious deities, wild in nature, warriors, and protectors who were worshipped by people from indigenous and marginal backgrounds (Chatterjee, 2013). However, the puranas[100], the body of literature that led to the crystallization of goddesses[101] (Chatterjee, 2013, p. 1439), emerged to strengthen the Brahmanical tradition, which was under threat from Buddhism and Tantra[102] (Chakrabarti, 2000). The Brahmans sought to attract people from non-Brahmanical traditions into Brahmanical forms of worship, which led to the emergence of syncretic religious traditions that incorporated diverse rituals and belief systems without challenging the hegemony of the Brahmans (Chakrabarti, 2000, p. 3). The puranas emerged from the dialogue between Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical religious traditions, which incorporated goddesses primarily due to their widespread popularity among regional and local communities, especially in Bengal (Chakrabarti, 2000, pp. 3-4). The popularity is evident in the most well-known text that celebrates the goddess, the *Devi Mahatmya*, which depicts the goddess's exploits (Chatterjee, 2013, p. 1439). The text incorporates both Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical goddess

[100] Puranas are a significant part of Hinduism. Puranas are a large number of texts, dated to the "early centuries of the Common Era" (Cush et al., 2008, p. 634). These are written in the Sanskrit language. The puranas in Hinduism are divided into 18 main puranas and 18 other, less popular puranas (Cush et al., 2008). See Cush, D., Robinson, C., & York, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (1st ed.). Routledge, https://doi-org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/10.4324/9780203862032 for more information.

[101] Crystallization of goddess is a process by which the diverse local goddesses are absorbed, like in the text *Devi Mahatmya*, a part of the *Markandeya Purana*, which brings together the local goddesses into the Hindu religious tradition (Coburn, 1984, p.20). See Coburn, T. B. (1984). *Devi-Mahatmya: The Crystallization of the Goddess Tradition*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, for more information.

[102] Hindu Tantra emerged in the 7th century. Tantra comprised rituals that involved mantras or sacred words, focusing on spirituality and primarily on energies of "female supernatural entities" as sources of power (Cush et al., 2008, p. 853). See Cush, D., Robinson, C., & York, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (1st ed.). Routledge, https://doi-org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/10.4324/9780203862032 for more information.

traditions, comprising non-Aryan and regional goddesses, as central to the understanding of the divine feminine, thereby presenting a diverse and rich perspective on the goddess tradition in India.

The domestication of goddesses happened with the emergence of the *Bhakti* (devotion) movement and the Vaishnava religious tradition in India. *Bhakti*, in other words, love and devotion, represents a union between devotee and divine figures that is devoid of any ritualistic practices or institutional control. The *Bhakti* movement holds significant political and religious implications, as it challenged the Brahmin monopoly on religion (Sangari, 1990). The movement also challenged caste and class distinctions by making religion accessible to all groups, including women and people from marginalized backgrounds (McDermott, 2001, p. 7). Under the influence of *Bhakti*, the imagery of the divine feminine evolved from ferocious to a more softened version, as seen in poems and songs such as the *Sakta Padavali* [103]of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, founded by Ramprasad Sen (McDermott, 2001, pp. 3-4). Ramprasad Sen introduced the *Shyama sangeet* (devotional songs on Kali) and *Uma sangeet* (devotional songs on goddess, Uma), which depicted the goddess as both daughter and mother (McDermott, 2001, p. 4). Her wild nature was tamed by the influence of devotional poetry that led to the domestication of the goddesses. Sanjukta Gupta notes that during the eighteenth century, worship of the goddess underwent transformation under Vaishnava religious influence, where Kali, once celebrated as a fiery figure in the *Devi Mahatmya*, is now depicted as a mother who is soft and kind to her devotees (Gupta, 2003, p. 65). Kumkum Chatterjee also notes that in the 'Vaishnavization' of goddesses, the focus shifted to goddesses as wife, mother, and daughter, as seen in the imagery of Uma[104], the wife of Siva (Chatterjee, 2013, p. 1441).

In the nineteenth century, as the nationalist movement began, freedom fighters sought more violent and fierce imagery of the goddess to evoke a sense of patriotism and unity among the general

[103] A genre of devotional songs dedicated mainly to Hindu goddesses, especially Kali.

[104] Uma is another name for Durga, used to emphasize a more maternal aspect of the goddess.

populace towards the nation. In this context, Kali was visualized as the "Desh-mata"[105](Saha Roy, 2021, p. 66) in the poetry of Kazi Nazrul Islam and Rabindranath Tagore[106] (Saha Roy, 2021). In the post-independence period, there was no need to evoke a violent image of the goddess. The focus was on strengthening India as a nation and glorifying the Indian past. Anant Pai, an upper-caste journalist from Bombay (Sreenivas, 2010, p. 1), started a comic book series called *Amar Chitra Katha,* the Immortal Picture Stories in 1967 (Sreenivas, 2010; McLain, 2008) written in English, as a response to the growing Westernization and influence of Western culture in India (McLain, 2008, p. 298) where he incorporated Hindu gods, goddesses, historical and mythological figures. The series glorified Hindu tradition through its characters, primarily men and select female figures (all Hindus). It was an attempt by Anant Pai to restore faith in Hindu tradition and values by remodeling Indian history. The series glorification of upper-caste, Brahmanical patriarchal depiction of Hindu figures and repacking of Hindu masculinity supported the ideology of Hindu nationalists, which upholds Brahmanical hegemony (Sreenivas, 2010, pp. 3-4). By repackaging, I mean presenting a stronger version of Hindu masculinity through figures such as Ram.

The comic book series eulogized female figures such as Sita, Sati, Parvati, Ganga, and Rukmini, all Hindu mythological figures known for their benevolence, docility, and idealized status as Hindu women. Among them were Durga and Kali in *Tales of Durga*, a comic book in 1978 of *Amar Chitra Katha*, based on the episodes from the *Devi Mahatmya*, where the imagery of Durga and Kali appeared to be more 'sanitized' (McLain, 2008, p. 319). The comic book presented a calmer version of the ferocious and bloodthirsty aspects of Kali and Durga's warrior skills, not to portray the goddesses as superior warriors. It was done to cater to the needs of the upper-caste, middle-class, vegetarian-eating Hindu population who might not accept the non-Brahmanical imagery that includes blood and flesh as ritual worship (McLain, 2008, pp. 316-319). The aim was to present a

[105] Meaning Mother of India.

[106] Nazrul and Tagore are well-known poets and literary figures of West Bengal.

Brahmanized, upper-caste narrative of goddesses in accordance with the values and culture of the upper-caste Hindu population, which aligns with Brahmanical patriarchal norms. The Hindutva discourse later co-opted the more tamed and domesticated imagery of the goddesses found in *Amar Chitra Katha,* which carefully balances between a savage and benevolent imagery of the goddesses. Hindutva politicians adopted that domesticated imagery because they needed it to justify women's participation in Hindu nationalist politics and present a new idea of Hindu womanhood.

Nevertheless, the goddess imagery was simplified into a category of mother and warrior goddesses. Between the mother goddesses and warrior goddess dichotomy, the imagery that became predominant in the Hindutva narrative is that of a mother goddess, typically an upper-caste, fair, and beautiful-looking, docile mother and wife. *Devi Mahatmya* (DM), however, is more complex in its glorification of the goddess. Interestingly, this dichotomy is not maintained in the text. The text's ambiguity and plurality in goddess imaginations are an 'antidote'[107] (Bhattacharya Saxena, 2021, p.288) to Hindutva's patriarchal and linear representation of the divine feminine. DM's representations also critique the ideal Hindu woman image, endorsed by Hindutva organizations. The following section focuses on the primary text, discussing its origin, composition, structure, and the stories of the goddess's exploits before analyzing the goddess's representations in the text.

THE TEXT AND ITS RELEVANCE

Thomas Coburn notes that, like most religious texts in India, the DM survived through oral tradition and the performance of the text in goddess worship (Coburn, 1996, p. 42). The text praises the goddess's power. It is a set of mantras (sacred words) (Coburn, 1996, pp. 42-43) to invoke the

[107] The word antidote (Bhattacharya Saxena, 2021, p.288) was used by Neela Bhattacharya Saxena in the exploration of the tantric vision of the divine feminine to talk about the rich religious Indian landscape in the context of Hindutva politics. See Bhattacharya Saxena, N. (2021). Women, goddesses and tantric praxis: a liberatory antidote to 'Hindutva' nationalist politics. *Contemporary South Asia*, *29*(2), 288–295, https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2021.1915246 for more information.

goddess's energy. The verses are recited at most of the temples and local pujas (worship) dedicated to the goddess. Cythnia Humes's (2000) research highlights the text's relevance in both public and private spheres through interviews of both men and women from varied professional backgrounds. Humes shows in her research participants' relationship with the text through the conversation on how they tend to imagine shakti (power), the goddess, and her powerful presence. While discussing the conflicting portrayal of the goddess in DM, with many admiring the divine feminine's powers, Humes's study focuses on how empowering the text can be based on the participants' understanding (Humes, 2000). The research highlights the text's relevance and importance in contemporary goddess worship in India, which draws my attention to exploring representations in the text in light of the use of goddesses by Hindutva organizations.

Devi Mahatmya (DM) is the first Sanskrit text to describe the mythology of goddesses, addressed in different names, forms, and as a single form of Mahamaya. The text is part of the *Markandeya Purana*, also known as Mark P, which was written in the 5th or 6th century C.E. (Coburn, 1984, p. 1; Coburn, 1992, p. 8; Coburn, 1996, p. 31). Although a part of Mark P, the DM, is seen as a separate text, as it is the first to establish and speak of the goddess as the ultimate reality (Coburn, 1984; Coburn, 1996, p. 40; Coburn, 1992).

ORIGIN OF DEVI MAHATMYA

There are debates surrounding the date of origin of the DM. F. Eden Pargiter noted that the text was probably written earlier than the 9th century (Pargiter, 1904, p. xiii). Thomas Coburn notes, following Pargiter, that the text was composed during the 5th or 6th century C.E. (Coburn, 1984). Coburn also notes that DM is an independent text (Coburn, 1992, p. 8). The chapters that constitute DM in Mark P are Chapters 81-93, accompanied by "sixty-seven commentaries" (Coburn, 1992, p. 8). Regarding the historical context of DM, Coburn argues that the text is not the earliest to speak of devotion towards the divine feminine, but it is undoubtedly the first to establish the goddess as the central figure of

worship (Coburn, 1992, p. 16). Regarding the geographical origin of the text, Pargiter notes that it was composed in Western India, near the Narmada and Tapti valleys (Pargiter, 1904, p. x).

DM is part of daily religious practices in worshipping the goddesses in India. The cultural, social, and religious significance of the text is evident in its continued use by individuals who engage with it in their religious practices and worship of the goddess. The use of the text points to the rich and active performative tradition through recitation of text in Kali and Durga Pujas in Bengal. Humes defines the text as central to understanding goddess tradition in India (Humes, 2000, p. 123).

COMPOSITION OF THE TEXT

Pargiter divided Mark P into five parts – Cantos[108] 1-9, Cantos 10-44, and Cantos 45-81, which deal with stories surrounding Jamini and Markandeya (Pargiter, 1904, p. iv). The speakers in the text frequently change in each canto. Cantos 82-92 are the *Devi Mahatmya*, and the speaker is Medhas, a *rishi* or ascetic. Final Cantos 93-136 continue the story from Canto 81 (Pargiter, 1904, pp. iv-vi). From Canto 82, the text centers on the glorification of the divine feminine as Mahamaya*,* featuring miraculous stories about the goddess's powers and her battles, which are vividly described in terms of her warrior skills. The text presents opposing imagery of the goddess, portraying both merciful and aggressive aspects (Pargiter, 1904, pp. vi-vii).

Coburn spoke of the multiple names and descriptions in DM that are attributed to the goddess, for instance, ‘Sri’, a feminine noun attached to the goddess to describe her as Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and prosperity, but also Sri refers to a “pre-Aryan goddess of fertility” (Coburn, 1992, p. 18). The goddess is referred to as prakrti (nature), maya (illusion), and shakti (Power), offering a diverse representation in terms of her role and character in DM. Words like tejas and shakti have been used in the text to convey the goddess’s powers. She is addressed as Ambika, Candika, Mahakali, Bhadrakali,

[108] Cantos refer to the main divisions in the text, DM.

and Mahamaya (Pargiter, 1904, p. x). Kali assumes a special place, as she is visualized as a separate figure born from the forehead of Candika, and she is given the name Camunda for killing the demons Canda and Munda (Pargiter, 1904, p. xi). There are Matrikas, or Mothers, who are identified as many shaktis (forms of powers or energies) of the goddess Mahamaya, all of whom are ferocious and fight the demons. Coburn and Kinsley note that the Matrikas are primarily goddesses of the periphery, viewed as aggressive, cruel, and ferocious, yet also maternal, and are not part of the Brahmanical tradition but were later included in the classical text *Devi Mahatmya* (Coburn, 1992, p. 21; Kinsley, 1978).

STRUCTURE AND STORY

In this section, I discuss in detail the main framework of the text and the three stories surrounding the goddess's killing of the demons, which form the core component of DM. There are three key myths surrounding the goddess's power in the text. There is a main story that includes three episodes about the great goddess Mahamaya. The main story has two parts. The first part begins with King Suratha and merchant Samadhi. King Suratha, defeated, is forced out of his kingdom and seeks refuge in the forest, where he meets the merchant or *vaisya*, Samadhi, who has been abandoned by his relatives and family (Pargiter, 1904, p. 465). They share their sorrows and wonder why they are still attached to material things and the people who have left them (Pargiter, 1904, p. 467). Later, they meet a sage in the forest whom they approach with their problems. The sage tells them that their selfish and conflicting thoughts are caused by Mahamaya's power, known as the "Great Illusion" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 469). By acknowledging the goddess's elusive nature, the sage then recites three main episodes that form the core of *Devi Mahatmya*. In the second half of the main story, King Suratha and Samadhi worship the great goddess Candika, offering their blood, flowers, fire, and water to her (Pargiter, 1904). After several years, she appears before them and grants their wishes. Suratha wishes to return

to his empire, and Samadhi seeks wisdom and detachment. It is Suratha who is then reborn as Manu Savarni, linking the *Devi Mahatmya* to Mark P. (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 522-523).

The three episodes in DM share a common theme in which the goddess appears before the male gods, who ask for her help to restore order in the universe and to defeat the demons. In the first episode, the sage draws attention to the goddess's imagery of Mahamaya. When describing the goddess as an illusion, King Suratha asks the sage about the origin of the goddess and her nature (Pargiter, 1904). The sage claims that there are many stories of her origin. He begins with the first story describing the goddess as the "Eternal One" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 469), where Vishnu[109] slays the two demons Madhu and Kaitabha, who originated from Vishnu's earwax. In this story, while Vishnu was resting on his great snake, Sesha, in the middle of the ocean, the demons threatened to attack Brahma[110], who was residing on Vishnu's navel. Brahma, facing the asuras (demons) while Vishnu lay deep in sleep, realized he was not capable of destroying the demons. So, Brahma prayed to the goddess and requested that she wake Vishnu so he could slay the demons. Then the goddess appears from Vishnu's eyes, nose, arms, heart, and breast, and releases Vishnu from his deep slumber. Vishnu fights the two demons, and the war continues for five thousand years (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 469- 472). The goddess then casts a spell on the demons, making them believe they have power over Vishnu (Pargiter, 1904). Deluded by this, when the demons offer Vishnu a boon, Vishnu declares that they will be killed by him and meet their fate. The demons have no choice but to grant that boon, with one condition that they will only be killed by Vishnu on dry ground, not covered with water. Vishnu agrees and kills the demons on his thighs (Das, 1985; Pargiter, 1904, p. 472).

The second episode is about the slaying of the demon Mahisasur, or Mahisa, and his army. The episode is divided into two parts in the text. The first part of the story focuses on Mahisa's army and

[109] One of the three main trinity Hindu male gods, besides Siva and Brahma.

[110] One of the three main Hindu male gods.

their defeat at the hands of the goddess. This part also includes the creation of the goddess Durga. The second part describes the battle in detail between the goddess and thousands of demons, including Mahisa. The story begins with the Asura army, led by Mahisa, defeating the gods and Indra, the ruler of heaven (Pargiter, 1904). Mahisa takes on Indra's throne and eliminates all the gods from heaven. The gods then seek the help of Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva, the three most powerful male gods in the Hindu religion. The gods narrate their tale of defeat to them. Hearing the ordeal of the gods, Vishnu, Siva, and Brahma's anger releases a "great energy" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 473) from their mouths. The energy emanating from the bodies of Indra and other gods combines with the energy released from the trinity (Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva), creating "a very great energy" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 474), from which the goddess Durga is born. The energies from various gods help create different parts of her body, starting with Siva's energy, which forms her face. Her hair and arms form from Yama's (God of Death) and Vishnu's energy. The Moon's energy shapes her breasts, while Indra's energy forms her waist. Her legs and thighs are created from Varuna's energy, and her hips from Earth's energy (Pargiter, 1904, p. 474). Next, the gods present weapons to the goddess. She receives a discus from Vishnu, a conch from Varuna, a spear from Agni, a thunderbolt from Indra, a bell from the elephant Airavata, a rod from Yama, a necklace from Prajapati, a water pot from Brahma, rays from the Sun god, and a sword and shield from Kala or Destiny (Pargiter, 1904, p. 474). Vishvakarma offers her an axe and other weapons, along with body armor (Pargiter, 1904, p. 475), and Himavat provides a lion, which becomes her vahan[111]. After receiving all the weapons and jewelry, the goddess[112] rides the lion to defeat Mahisa (Pargiter, 1904).

From the goddess emanates a light so powerful that it causes the earth to bow to her (Pargiter, 1904). The earth shakes with her roar, and her ten arms stretch out across the sky (Pargiter, 1904, p. 475). The text highlights the enormous power of the goddess, capable of shaking the universe with a

[111] Chariot of the goddess.

[112] The text refers to the goddess by multiple names such as Ambika, Candika, Bhadrakali, and Durga.

single roar. The battle begins with two demons, the asura generals Cikshura and Camara, sent by Mahisa to fight the goddess (Pargiter, 1904, p. 476). Other asuras, such as Udagra, Maha-banu, Asi-loman, Vaskala, and Vidala, fight alongside the generals, accompanied by thousands of chariots, horses, and elephants (Pargiter, 1904, p. 476). They wield swords, spears, axes, and iron maces in their attempt to defeat the goddess. The goddess, often called Candika, Ambika, and Bhadrakali,[113] fights with her weapons, destroying thousands of demons (Pargiter, 1904). The battle with the demons reveals the goddess's most violent and aggressive side, showcasing her martial strength (Pargiter, 1904). She is ruthless and furious, battling thousands of demons alone, showing her massive power as she constantly cuts off their heads and limbs (Pargiter, 1904).

A fight breaks out between Cikshura and Ambika, where Cikshura launches a "shower of arrows" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 478) at the goddess, who destroys the asura's chariot, horses, and bows. Seeing this, he marches toward the goddess with shield and sword for face-to-face combat. Cikshura's sword breaks into pieces as it touches the goddess (Pargiter, 1904). Then Cikshura uses his spear, and Bhadrakali[114], with her spear, breaks Cikshura's weapon and kills the asura general (Pargiter, 1904, p. 479). Then Camara attacks Ambika with a spear, but all his weapons are destroyed by Ambika. The lion then splits Camara's head with its paws (Pargiter, 1904). Demons Udagra and Karala are defeated by the goddess using her "teeth and fists, and feet" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 479), while other demons are killed with a dart, arrows, and a trident.

Finally, Mahisa, in his buffalo avatar, rushes to kill the goddess's lion, unleashing the anger of Ambika (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 480-481). Mahisa has the power to change his shape and take any form. So, when Candika uses the noose to bind the buffalo, Mahisa changes his buffalo avatar to a lion. When Ambika tries to split the head of the lion, Mahisa takes the shape of a man (Pargiter, 1904, pp.

[113] Names of the goddess are interchangeably used in the text.

[114] Another name of the goddess.

480-481). Despite Mahisa's tricks, the goddess's lion, in Mahisa's half-buffalo and half-human form, steps on the buffalo, and the goddess beheads Mahisa (Pargiter, 1904, p. 481). With the defeat of Mahisa, the entire asura army was destroyed (Pargiter, 1904).

The third and final episode is the killing of demons Sumbha and Nisumbha. The gods, after being defeated by Sumbha and Nisumbha, invoke the goddess Candika, who resides in Himavat. While the gods are praying to her, Parvati, who is bathing in the Ganges, hears the hymn and asks the gods to whom the hymn is dedicated. Ambika says it is addressed to her, and she appears from Parvati. *kosha*[115](Pargiter, 1904). Since Ambika emerges from Parvati's *kosha*, she is known as Kaushiki (Pargiter, 1904, p. 494). The goddess Parvati turned black and is called Kalika*,* who resides in Mount Himavat (Coburn, 1992, p. 55; Pargiter, 1904).

Canda and Munda, who are two loyal asura (demon) servants of Sumbha and Nisumbha, witness Ambika's beauty and inform Sumbha about a mysterious, captivating woman of Himavat. Sumbha decides to capture the goddess and marry her. He sends demon Sugriva as a messenger to convey to the goddess the feelings of Sumbha. So, Sugriva travels to the mountains and politely conveys the message, stating that Sumbha is willing to marry the goddess (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 495-496). Hearing this, the goddess challenges both Sumbha and Nisumbha to a duel, and if they can defeat her in the fight, they are a perfect match for the goddess (Pargiter, 1904, p. 496). Sugriva, hearing that, warns the goddess of the immense power of the two asuras, saying that even Indra and all the male gods fear to fight with them. A single woman stands no chance of survival. Sugriva urges the goddess to accept the terms sent by the asuras and marry them, or else he will drag her by the hair to the asuras, and her dignity will be lost. However, the goddess refuses and asks the two asuras to come and battle her (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 496-497).

[115] Kosh or Kosha is referred to as the "treasure-house" of the goddess's body by Pargiter (1904, p. 494) and "body sheath" by Coburn (1992, p. 55).

The two asura lords send another general, Dhumra-locana, with an army of sixty thousand demons to slay the goddess (Pargiter, 1904, p. 497). Dhumra-locana declares that because she is a woman, he will approach her respectfully, but if she refuses, he will also drag her by her hair. When the goddess refuses, Dhumra-locana attempts to capture her, and the goddess, with a "mere roar" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 498), turns the demon into ashes (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 497-498). Then, sixty thousand asura soldiers throw arrows, axes, and javelins at Ambika. The goddess's lion charges the asura army and kills many with its paws, mouth, and heavy strikes. The lion's attack was enough to defeat the army sent with Dhumra-locana (Pargiter, 1904, p. 498). Then Sumbha sends Canda and Munda, along with a large army of demons, and orders them to defeat the goddess, drag or bind her, and bring her to his court. So, when Canda and Munda rush to kill the goddess, from Ambika's wrath, Kali appears from her forehead, dark in color, with a sword and noose, wearing many skulls as a garland (Pargiter, 1904, p. 499).

Kali swallows the elephants, the riders, chariots, and asuras and grabs them by the hair, smashing the asuras with her breast and foot (Pargiter, 1904, p. 499). Kali smashes every weapon and other asuras with her teeth. Her rage crushes all the demons who come in her way. Canda and Munda both attack Kali after seeing the goddess destroying all of the army. The arrows and discus fail to harm Kali as she laughs and roars at the asuras, exposing her frightening teeth and mouth full of blood and flesh. Kali grabs Canda and cuts his head off with the sword. Then kills Munda with her scimitar. Horrified by the terrible appearance of Kali, on her killing spree, the rest of the asuras flee from the battle (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 499-500).

After the deaths of Canda and Munda, Sumbha sends another round of demons, consisting of eighty-six demons, eighty-four thieves, fifty asura families known for their courage and valour, and a hundred families of demons to kill the goddess (Pargiter, 1904, p. 501). Candika and Kali roar, and the

roar fills the sky and the earth with terror and horror. Then the energies[116] from the gods take bodily forms to battle alongside the goddess. The energies are offered by Brahma, Siva, Vishnu, Indra, and many other gods (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 501-503). Ultimately, from Candika's energy emerges the most terrifying and ferocious form, "howling like a hundred jackals" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 503).

Then Rakta-vija, another demon, enters the battle scene, wielding special powers that enable him to create an army of asuras from his blood. Wherever his blood drops, a demon appears. Rakta-vija alone fights with the Matrikas (Mothers) or energies that assist the goddess. He battles with Indra's energy and thunderbolts, and wherever his blood flows, new asuras are born. This causes an army of asuras to start forming from Rakta-vija's blood. At this point, when the Matrikas cannot control Rakta-vija, Candika urges Kali to kill the demon (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 504-505). So, Kali joins the battle, swallowing Rakta-vija's blood wherever it falls to the ground, preventing it from creating more demons (Pargiter, 1904). During Rakta-vija's fight with Candika, the demon strikes her with his club, but it causes no pain to the goddess. Kali quickly swallows the blood flowing from the demon's body, and the new asuras forming from the blood in Kali's mouth are again devoured by her (Pargiter, 1904, p. 505). The final act involves the goddess striking Rakta-vija with all her weapons, while Kali simultaneously drinks Rakta-vija's blood, leaving him 'blood-less' (Pargiter, 1904, p. 506). Rakta-vija finally dies as the Matrikas dance in joy (Pargiter, 1904).

After the killing of Rakta-vija, Sumbha and Nisumbha, along with their army of asuras, march to destroy the goddess and the Matrikas. The asuras fight against the Matrikas and then engage in a face-to-face battle with the goddess Candika (Pargiter, pp. 506-507). When the asuras shower arrows at Candika, the goddess splits the arrows in half and punches the limbs of two demons. The battle between Candika and Nisumbha continues, and finally, Candika defeats Nisumbha, using her trident and arrows, who falls to the ground (Pargiter, 1904). Sumbha, watching his brother defeated, charges

[116] The energies are Matrikas.

toward Ambika, accompanied by several asuras and weapons (Pargiter, 1904, p. 507). The goddess reveals her power to Sumbha by ringing the bell, which fills the worlds with sound and shakes the asura army's strength (Pargiter, 1904, p. 507). The goddess's lion roars, filling all regions, the universe, and the three worlds with its roar. Kali demonstrates her strength by striking heaven and earth with her hands, and Siva-duti's (one of the Matrikas) ominous laugh shakes the asuras with fear (Pargiter, 1904, p. 507). Candika then strikes Sumbha with a dart, causing him to fall to the ground (Pargiter, 1904).

Nisumbha, "regaining consciousness", attacks the goddess Kali and her lion with arrows and a discus (Pargiter, 1904, p. 508). Then ferocious Durga splits the discus and arrows. Then Nisumbha, along with his army, attacks Candika with a club. Candika deflects his club with her scimitar and then pierces a dart into Nisumbha. From Nisumbha emerges another beast. The goddess cuts off the demon's head with her scimitar (Pargiter, 1904). Meanwhile, the goddess's lion devours the asura army, and Kali and Siva-duti also crush the army with their mounts, consuming them all. Sumbha, outraged by the killing of his beloved brother Nisumbha, challenges the goddess's power, urging her to fight alone with him, without the help of other goddesses, if she is so powerful. Hearing Sumbha's challenge, the goddess explains that all the energies or the Matrikas are part of one body, the Mahamaya. The goddess absorbs the Matrikas into her body and, standing alone, asks the asura to fight her in the battle. Thus begins the final fight between Sumbha and the goddess. Sumbha attacks the goddess with his fist, and the goddess uses her dart to pierce Sumbha's heart. Slain by the goddess, all three worlds, the sky, earth, and universe, are freed from the demon's control (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 509-511).

ANALYSIS

The stories highlight several key points regarding the imagery of goddesses and how they are depicted in the text. In this section, I explore the complex, nuanced, and multifaceted imagery of the divine feminine in DM. While the previous chapter discussed how Hindutva representations reduce the divine

feminine to a passive, domesticated, stereotypical figure and a symbol of the Hindu nation, this chapter reveals a richer and more nuanced understanding of the goddess as depicted through the glorification of goddesses in the text. These representations in DM highlight the pluralistic, paradoxical, and empowering qualities of the goddesses, which directly challenge and resist the patriarchal and simplified interpretations put forward by Hindu nationalists.

The imagery of the goddess in DM is not a form of art or visual depictions. The imagery of the goddess emerges from the themes, names, forms, and descriptions, as well as the qualities attributed to her in the text. These representations in DM convey the multiple versions of the divine feminine and how complex the understanding of the divine feminine is in the Hindu religious tradition. The broad themes that emerge from the text include the description of the goddess's martial power, her ambiguous imagery, her wild and ferocious form, and her cosmic prowess, as well as the regional/local forms of goddesses that are not included in mainstream Hindutva representations.

In DM, the goddess is benevolent, aggressive, complex, and the demon herself. She is bloodthirsty. She drinks wine, and she is not following a code of modesty. She is wild and untamed, but she is also a nurturer. She is the creator of the universe. In my analysis of the goddess's imagery in the text, I have structured it around four major themes: the ambiguous divine feminine, the warrior goddess, the Matrikas or Mothers, regional forms, and the goddess as an empowering figure. Under each broad theme, I provide a detailed discussion of the goddess's portrayal to illustrate how it contradicts the understanding of goddesses in the Hindutva narrative. I begin by discussing the ambiguous representation of the divine feminine in the text, DM. I start with this theme because it immediately confronts the simplified, homogenous Hindutva goddess narrative by presenting the divine feminine as a figure who cannot be categorized solely as ferocious or nurturing, as she is both and many more. This discussion of the ambiguous theme sets the stage for the rest of the analysis on the divine feminine.

THE AMBIGUOUS DIVINE FEMININE

The text establishes the goddess's dominance over the cosmic world. She is the "Great Illusion" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 469) who possesses the power to influence the minds of people, bind them to the illusions of worldly pleasures, and also has the capacity to free their minds from the illusion of the world. She is the illusion herself, but she also offers boons to people and emancipates them (Pargiter, 1904, p. 469). Establishing the goddess as the supreme illusion, DM states,

> Verily she, the adorable goddess, Great Illusion, forcibly drawing the minds even of those who know, presents them to delusion. By her is created this whole universel both moveable and immoveable; she it is who when propitious bestows boons on men with a view to their final emancipation, She is Knowledge supreme; she is the eternal cause of final emancipation, and the cause of the bondage of worldly existence; she indeed is the queen over all lords. (Pargiter, 1904, p. 469)

By suggesting that the goddess is both the reason for people's material attachments and also someone who frees them, the text projects an ambiguous image of the divine feminine that cannot be compartmentalized into a stereotypical and simplified category. The first episode portrays the cosmic mastery of the goddess, who keeps Vishnu, one of the powerful Hindu male gods, in a never-ending sleep, and it is only when she leaves Vishnu's body that Vishnu gains back power. It is almost as if she rendered Vishnu powerless by keeping him in a trance-like state (Coburn, 1996). Her power of illusion is evident when the goddess herself deceives the demons into believing they can grant a blessing to Vishnu, which results in Vishnu's killing of the demons (Coburn, 1996, p. 35).

When the goddess is equated with maya[117] or illusion, it is not in the negative sense but to point to the cosmic power of the goddess (Coburn, 1996). Her imagery as maya plays two different

[117] Maya means, in general, illusion or the "delusive divine power" (Pintchman, 2018, p. 18). In Hindu philosophy, the goddess is equated with shakti, prakriti, and maya, which serve as the root of the goddess's transcendental power. Shakti is power or energy, and prakriti is 'matter' (Pintchman, 2018, p. 18). See Pintchman, T. (2018). Cosmological, devotional, and social perspectives on the Hindu goddess. In M. Bose (Ed.), *The Oxford history of Hinduism: The goddess* (pp. 17–

functions. On one hand, she is the source of illusion who keeps humankind in a state of 'unconsciousness', and on the other, she is the only reality which brings people to life, gives birth, and brings them out of illusion (Marsman, 2019, p. 187). Coburn calls this representation of the goddess, both emancipation and maya, a 'paradox' (Coburn, 1996, p. 33), which the text does not seek to 'resolve', as this anomaly is closely aligned with the goddess's representation in DM (Coburn, 1996, p. 33). Coburn (1996) describes how, in the Rig Veda, maya means magical power, which is often associated with demons. However, the text describes the goddess both as Mahamaya and as 'Mahasuri' or "the Great Demon" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 471), thereby blurring the distinction between demons and gods (Coburn, 1996, pp. 31-33).

The goddess is established as the one who rules the three worlds (Heaven, Hell, and Earth). She is the creator, the one who safeguards three worlds and possesses the ability to destroy them all. The goddess is referred to as the 'sublime' (Pargiter, 1904, p. 494) mother, who is awe-inspiring and majestic. The text is careful not to categorize the goddess as a traditional mother goddess, with qualities more inclined towards affection, benevolence, and nurturing. The text does not follow the traditional dichotomy of mother and warrior goddess. The divine feminine in the DM is complex and ambiguous, possessing the ability to both create and destroy the universe simultaneously. She is referred to as the mother, for she is seen as the creator of the universe. The multiple roles and forms she is associated with are best depicted in the quote below,

> O thou who containest the world! Thou art the Great Knowledge, the Great Illusion, the Great Vigour, the Great Memory, and the Great Delusion[118], the Lady, the Great Goddess, the Great

38). Oxford University Press. https://doi-org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/10.1093/oso/9780198767022.003.0002 for more information.

[118] Maha-moha (Pargiter, 1904, p. 471)

> Demon[119]. And thou art the original source[120] of the universe, the exciting cause of the three qualities; thou art the Night of the world's destruction, the Great Night, and the Night of delusion, terrible! Thou art Good Fortune, thou art Queen, thou art Modesty; thou art Intelligence characterized by perception; thou art Shame, Nourishment, and Contentment, Tranquility and Patience also. Thou art terrible, armed with sword, with spear, with club, and with discus, with conch, with bow, and having as weapons arrows, slings and an iron mace. (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 470-471)

The text presents two opposite qualities in the quote above. The goddess, on the one hand, is the great delusion, illusion, and destruction. She is the terrible and fierce form, the great demoness. She is a warrior who carries a sword and various other weapons. On the other hand, the goddess is defined as prakrti, the source of creation. She is 'gentle' (Pargiter, 1904, p. 471) and beautiful. She is the essence of all creation, and no one is more powerful than her (Pargiter, 1904). She possesses both good and bad energy (Pargiter, 1904, p. 471). The text states, lauding the immeasurable power of her creation, "Who is able here to extol thee? Since Vishnu, I and Siva have been made by thee to assume bodies, who then may be powerful enough to extol thee?" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 471).

The text goes on to state that the goddess is timeless and eternal. Her existence is transcendental, yet she takes birth time and again when the universe needs her. She is identified as the goddess of darkness and also as Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, wealth, and balance (Pargiter, 1904, p. 522). She is the creator of the universe, and she is also the "Great Destroying Goddess" or the "Maha-mari" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 521). Her presence brings good fortune, while her absence brings ill luck (Pargiter, 1904). DM states,

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[119] Maha-suri (Pargiter, 1904, p. 471)

[120] Prakrti or the primordial or root from which everything is created (Pintchman, 2018, p. 19). See Pintchman, T. (2018). Cosmological, devotional, and social perspectives on the Hindu goddess. In M. Bose (Ed.), *The Oxford history of Hinduism: The goddess* (pp. 17–38). Oxford University Press. https://doi-org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/10.1093/oso/9780198767022.003.0002 for more information.

> She indeed is Maha-mari at the fated time; she indeed is creation, the Unborn; she indeed the Eternal gives stability to created beings at their fated time. She indeed is Lakshmi, bestowing prosperity on the houses of men while she abides with them; and she indeed when she is absent becomes the goddess of Ill Fortune unto their destruction. (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 521-522).

The goddess is identified in the text as shakti*,* or powerful energy, and this extreme power is manifested when Durga is created to slay Mahisasur. Shakti or power (Pintchman, 2018, p. 18), underlines the "universal, divine" capacity of the goddess to create the universe and maintain its stability throughout (Pintchman, 2018, p. 18). DM states, "Of all that, you are the power (sakti); how then can you be adequately praised?" (Coburn, 1992, p. 37). As shakti*,* the goddess is present in all beings and provides power to all, making her 'immanent' (Pintchman, 2018, p. 19). However, at the same time, she is mystical, transcendental, and unfathomable.

When Durga is created in the second episode, it might be interpreted that the male gods are creating the goddess to save the universe from Mahisa. However, the goddess is shakti herself (Kinsley, 1978). It is not the male gods who are creating her. Instead, she is drawing the energy from all male gods and becoming a superior energy (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 473-474; Kinsley, 1978, p. 498; Kinsley, 1987). Kinsley notes that the male gods, in creating Durga, submit their power and their 'potency' to the goddess (Kinsley, 1987, p. 97). She is joined by other great energies on the battlefield, such as Vishnu's energy and Siva's energy, but again, these energies are not created by male gods. The goddess is an independent deity in the text who provides power to all mankind and to the gods. The text clearly emphasizes that the energy formed from the gods is a female entity who possesses the highest powers and weapons, unmatched by any male gods, and has the sole capacity to destroy the demons. DM states

> The gods beheld the mass of intense energy there like a burning mountain, pervading the other regions of the sky with its blaze; and that unparalleled energy born of the bodies of all the gods,

which pervaded the three worlds with its light, gathering into one became a female. (Pargiter, 1904, p. 474)

The goddess in DM is also 'formless' (Kinsley, 1978, p. 500). The goddess is depicted throughout the text embodying different energies and forms, and as someone who is beyond the understanding of even the great male gods, Vishnu, Siva, and Brahma. The varied forms she embraces are extreme in nature. In the text, it is stated,

Whatever gentle forms of thee wander about in the three worlds,

And whatever exceedingly terrible forms wander, by means of them guard us and the earth! (Pargiter, 1904, p. 487)

There is not one form that remains constant throughout the text. As shakti, the goddess embodies multiple energies, manifesting in different forms during battle. The energies mentioned in the text are merely other forms of the goddess, which merge into her in the final battlefield (Kinsley, 1978). They combine to reveal the goddess's exceptional powers. In the third episode, when the goddess succeeds in killing the demons, DM emphasizes the multiple forms of the goddess, stating, "By multiplying thy body in many forms, O Ambika, what other goddess achieves that?" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 516). Apart from Matrikas, the goddess assumes non-human forms, such as illusion and destruction, which point to the formlessness and complexity in the representation of the divine feminine within the Hindu religious tradition. Kinsley notes that such representations comply with the Hindu tradition of understanding reality as immeasurable or 'unspecified' (Kinsley, 1978, p. 500). The goddess is present in every other figure, whether it be Lakshmi, Gauri, Parvati (Siva's wife), Kali, Ambika, Candi, or Camunda. She is the ultimate reality (Pargiter, 1904; Kinsley, 1978), yet she remains unknown and mysterious.

The text breaks the traditional notion of the goddess as a fair-complexioned, attractive, upper-caste figure. While lauding the goddess's beauty and power, the goddess appears as a dark-skinned

figure in the text. This representation challenges the traditional notion of beauty associated with the goddess imagery in Hindutva discourse. The many forms that the goddess assumes in the text include both attractive and fierce forms. For instance, the energy that emanates from Candika to kill Rakta-vija is described in DM as "most terrific, exceedingly fierce, howling like a hundred jackals" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 503). Moreover, there is no fixed skin color of the goddess in DM. In one instance, the goddess has a blue and black complexion. The text lauds the goddess as

> To her who is essential, to her who works all things,
>
> And to Fame also, to her who is blue-black,
>
> To her who is smoke-dark reverence continually! (Pargiter, 1904, p. 490)

When Kali is introduced in the text, she is described as a dark goddess with a blood-red tongue. She is wearing just a tiger skin, with a wide mouth and terrible appearance, almost abhorrent to the demon army (Pargiter, 1904; Coburn, 1992). DM challenges the Brahmanical patriarchal conception of women, not only in terms of beauty standards but also in terms of modesty, as we see a celebrated Kali's figure wearing a garland of skulls and a tiger skin to cover her breasts and body (Pargiter, 1904). She is devouring human flesh, drinking blood, and taking pleasure in doing so. This representation is starkly different from the upper-caste notions of associating goddesses with vegetarianism and modesty. There is no sense of shame or guilt in Kali's appearance. The text does not stop there. There are figures like Katyayani, Candika, Camunda, and the band of Matrikas, who are terrible, horrific figures, constantly drinking blood and taking pleasure in killing the demons.

The ambiguity in the goddess representation is visible as the text interchangeably addresses the goddess as Ambika and Candika. Both convey two opposite aspects of the goddess's imagery in the text. While Ambika signals the goddess's nurturing, motherly attitude and permanence, Candika is the opposite of the gentle and softer side of Ambika (Kinsley, 1978). Candika represents chaos. She is a terrible form who is cruel and harsh. She is referred to as Camunda, Kali, and Raktadantika (the

blood-toothed goddess) (Kinsley, 1978, p. 501). The qualities attributed to the goddess and what she represents are also extreme and paradoxical in nature. She is consciousness, intelligence, supreme knowledge, fame, emancipation, peace, prosperity, calmness, and good fortune (Pargiter, 1904, p. 490). She also represents error, hunger, thirst, and shadow (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 490-493). By stating the opposite and extreme forms, including the multiple energies of the goddess, the text highlights the fact that the actual representation of the divine feminine lies in its ambiguity and complexity. The goddess is at once beautiful and grotesque. She is, as the text defines, "You are superior to the high and low, the supreme queen" (Coburn, 1992, p. 37).

The goddess has both positive and negative forms. Both her forms are a part of her reality. To focus on one aspect of her form or her energy is to overlook the many aspects and energies that are central to the divine feminine imagination. The multiple representations, paradoxes, and ambiguities bear witness to the plurality in the goddess's imagination in the text. This plural representation includes forms that challenge patriarchy and Hindutva's narrow and homogenous categorization of goddesses.

According to Humes, the text makes it clear that the divine feminine is "plural, immanent and active" (Humes, 2000, p. 131). Humes argued that the goddess can be imagined as assuming 'masculine' qualities in the text when fighting the demons. She is not displaying the qualities of femininity in the text (Humes, 2000, p. 133), which supports the logic that to challenge patriarchy or male supremacy, a goddess or female power must embrace a masculine trait, such as that of a male warrior (Humes, 2000). However, I argue that the goddess as a warrior transgresses the normative idea of male supremacy on the battlefield. If we imagine the goddess as taking on a masculine role, we are falling into the trap of the gendered notion of relating masculinity with war, battle skills, and martial power, and women as being subjected to the domestic realm. I argue that Humes's claims are not entirely correct, as both masculine and feminine qualities are evident in the goddess's portrayal in the text. The text does not separate these traits or attempt to associate her warrior abilities specifically

with masculinity. It clearly states that one thing is certain about the goddess's identity: the supreme energy is female (Pargiter, 1904, p. 474).

Nonetheless, the text consistently emphasizes the difficulty in measuring the goddess's power. Ambiguity defines her identity. It is difficult to categorize her traits strictly as masculine or feminine. DM emphasizes that the goddess is the central figure and the only active agent on the battlefield, killing the demons. She is not secondary to any male gods. The text establishes that "the effective agent on earth, as in the cosmos, is not masculine but feminine, not king but queen" (Coburn, 1996, p. 38)

The ambiguous imagery of the goddess in the text suggests that it is challenging to understand the divine feminine within a singular or linear perspective. The ambiguity signals the diverse ways the goddess is remembered in text and the vast worship culture of the Hindu religious tradition. The worship includes revering both the calm representations of the goddess and the more intimidating images of the goddess. The ambiguity also conveys the inclusion of all forms of negative and positive notions associated with the goddesses, including darkness, hunger, beauty, and the grotesque, dark-skinned appearance of Kali. The ambiguous imagery also indicates regional or local goddess traditions within the divine feminine concept, which I explore in the third section. In the following section, I focus on one of the most prominent representations of the goddess in the text: her warrior aspect.

THE WARRIOR GODDESS IMAGERY

Having discussed the ambiguous imagery of the divine feminine in DM, I now turn to the warrior aspect of her representation in the text, which in multiple ways challenges the restrictive, patriarchal, and domesticated goddess archetype in the Hindutva discourse. The last two episodes of killing Sumbha, Nisumbha, and Mahisasur consist of a specific focus on the warrior skills of the goddess, who assumes multiple forms and attacks the band of asuras single-handedly with the help of a lion.

The text highlights the goddess's dominance not only through her cosmic power but also through her warrior skills, roars, anger, laughter, and her nonchalant demeanor on the battlefield. When goddess Durga was evoked to kill Mahisa, she is described as declaring her presence through roars, shaking the three worlds, and penetrating the sky with a thousand hands (Pargiter, 1904, p. 475). Her power is so immense that the earth bows before her (Pargiter, 1904). In the battle against Mahisa, the goddess fights multiple demons who are equally powerful asura generals with magical abilities. These asuras are accompanied by cavalry, chariots, elephants, and horses, such as Maha-banu with thousands of asuras, Asi-loma with a fifty-million-strong army of asuras, Ugra-darsana with thousands of horses and elephants, and Vidala with fifty chariots (Pargiter, 1904, p. 476). While Mahisa is surrounded by ten million chariots, elephants, horses, and an army (Pargiter, 1904), the goddess is alone in the battle. As the demons attack with spears, swords, javelins, axes, clubs, nooses, bows, and arrows, Candika easily destroys all the weapons. The goddess in DM is battle-ready. She knows how to use various types of weapons, possesses excellent combat skills, and has a solid knowledge of warfare. She uses multiple weapons simultaneously during combat. She fights effortlessly with the asuras, destroying their arms as the text states, “And then the goddess C'andika clove, as it were in merest play, those weapons and arms by raining forth her own weapons and arms” (Pargiter, 1904, p. 476). Not all the time does the goddess use her weapons. She also uses her bell to cast a spell, as the text states.

> Then the goddess with her trident, her club, with showers of spears, and with her sword and other weapons slaughtered the great Asuras in hundreds, and laid others low who were bewitched with the ringing of her bell; and binding other Asuras with her noose dragged them on the ground. (Pargiter, 1904, p. 477)

The text highlights how easily the goddess destroys the demon army that came before Mahisasur, stating, “Thus Ambika brought that great army of the Asuras to utter destruction in a moment” (Pargiter, 1904, p. 478). The goddess’s exceptional martial skill is evident from the detailed description of the battle and fighting sequence. When Cikshura charges toward the goddess, firing

thousands of arrows at her, she playfully cuts down all the arrows, destroys Cikshura's horses and chariots, and breaks Cikshura's bow while puncturing his limbs (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 478-479). Describing the power of the goddess in the battle between Cikshura and Bhadrakali, DM states,

> His sword shivered to pieces as it touched her arm (O prince). Thereon red-eyed with anger, he grasped his pike, and he, the great Asura, flung it at Bhadra-kali, as it were the Sun's orb blazing brightly with its splendour from out the sky. Seeing that pike falling on her, the goddess hurled her pike, and it shattered that pike into a hundred fragments and the great Asura also. (Pargiter, 1904, p. 479)

Finally, as Mahisa approaches, he shifts his form from buffalo to lion and then to human form, showcasing his power. The goddess remains unfazed by Mahisa's display of magical power. She laughs at Mahisa and drinks "a sublime beverage again and again" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 481), restoring her energy for the fight (Pargiter, 1904). The text highlights that the goddess drinks alcoholic beverages during the battle to regain strength and that she is in a trance-like state from drinking, with her eyes turning bloody "by the mead that she had drunk" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 481). When Mahisa attacks her with full force, shaking mountains to hurt Candika, the goddess is still seen enjoying her drink. The intoxicated goddess Candika then utters a few words to Mahisa, saying, "Roar, roar on thy brief moment, O fool, the while I quaff this mead! The gods shall soon roar, when I shall slay thee even here" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 481).

The image of the intoxicated goddess on the battlefield, unbothered by the asura king's power, presents an unapologetic and unbothered imagery of her. She drinks and kills, implying a sense of authority over her actions and her dominance on the battlefield. She is a goddess who is untamed, wild, and independent. Seeing the "wrathful face" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 484) and her martial strength, Mahisa tries to deceive and attack the goddess with tricks and magic. However, the goddess does not resort to tactics or deceit to win the war (Kinsley, 1987). She is unstoppable, and her simple roar can

shake the entire asura universe. Just her presence is enough to cause panic and chaos among the asura leaders, who keep failing to kill her. The goddess's very presence, her gaze, weapons, and wrath "subdues the conduct of men of evil conduct" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 486).

The goddess's martial skill becomes most pronounced in the third episode, when she is joined by the Matrikas, or Mothers, on the battlefield to kill Sumbha and Nisumbha. The goddess here assumes the most ferocious and monstrous form in order to erase the demons from Earth. Here, also seeing her exceeding beauty, the asuras want to own her, and she challenges them to defeat her in battle first (Pargiter, 1904). Her forthright challenge shakes the pride of Sumbha and Nisumbha, who sent Dhumra-locana to defeat her, who is turned into ashes by a mere roar of Ambika (Pargiter, 1904, p. 498).

The goddess in DM is gentle, but her strength and individuality lie in her primary role as a warrior. She is a warrior first who possesses superior battle skills and knowledge of weapons over any male gods in the universe. The text, when describing her warrior skills, does not "soften" (Kinsley, 1978, p. 493) the imagery of the goddess. Instead, she is in her most comfortable self when fighting battles and killing demons (Kinsley, 1978). She is not someone who, after fighting the war, goes back to being a consort goddess and assumes a secondary role (Kisnley,1987). The goddess's warrior imagery in the text is not confined to the idea of *Viranganas* in Hindutva discourse, who enter the battleground only in limited circumstances to save their family's or their nation's honor. In Hindutva's narrative, *Viranganas* can be great warriors, but they do not enjoy complete freedom as warriors, as their primary duty is as wives and mothers. While Hindutva nationalists praise goddesses like Kali, Durga, and historical figures like Lakshmibai, they also warn women about the damaging effects on family and social roles if women gain too much power. The goddess in DM does not follow such a patriarchal trope. Battleground is her domain. She eats flesh, the blood of demons, and kills them ruthlessly. Kinsley rightly says, "She is a woman, to be sure, but she can outfight (and probably outdrink) any of the great male gods" (Kinsley, 1978, p. 493).

Another aspect of the warrior imagery that stands out in the text is the wild, savage, and violent nature and appearance of the divine feminine, best described through Kali, Camunda, and Candika. The ferocious aspect of the warrior goddess is not presented in the text in a manner that establishes the goddess as the anti-heroine. Her bloodthirsty image is as much a part of her identity as her gentle nature. In the third episode, when Canda and Munda attack Ambika to capture her and bring her to Sumbha and Nisumbha's court, from Ambika's forehead emerges Kali. The text describes Kali's origin and appearance, stating,

> Thereat Ambika uttered her wrath aloud against those foes, and her countenance then grew dark as ink in her wrath. Out from the surface of her forehead, which was rugged with frowns, issued suddenly Kali of the terrible countenance, armed with a sword and noose, bearing a many-coloured skull-topped staff, decorated with a garland of skulls, clad in a tiger's skin, very appalling because of her emaciated flesh, exceedingly wide of mouth, lolling out her tongue terribly, having deep-sunk reddish eyes, and filling the regions of the sky with her roars. (Pargiter, 1904, p. 499)

Kali appears in the text as the most dangerous and aggressive figure of the divine feminine who swallows all the demons that come her way. She grabs the asuras by hair and neck and smashes them with her foot and her breasts (Pargiter, 1904, p. 499). Using her mouth, Kali seizes the weapons of the asura army and crushes them with her teeth (Pargiter, 1904). The text goes on describing Kali's wrath and untamed nature, stating,

> Taking up the elephants with one hand she flung them into her mouth, together with their rear-men and drivers and their warrior-riders and bells. Flinging likewise warrior with his horses, and chariot with its driver into her month, she ground them most frightfully with her teeth. (Pargiter, 1904, p. 499)

Kali is depicted in the text as the most furious incarnation of the divine feminine who knows no bounds. She creates havoc on the battlefield, devouring whatever comes her way (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 499-500). Her wrath continues as she kills asuras with her sword and her "skull-topped staff" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 500). She is described as the "exceedingly appalling" and "terrible-eyed goddess" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 500) in the text. Her fearless personality is clearly shown in the text when Canda and Munda charge her with bows, arrows, discuses, and she is depicted as "roaring frightfully, laughed terribly with excessive fury, showing the gleam of her unsightly teeth within her dreadful mouth" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 500). Her aggressiveness is visible not only in the way she fights in the battle but also in her appearance. She revels in battles, cutting and crushing the heads of Canda and Munda, and bringing them to Candika's feet (Pargiter, 1904). Kali displays her power and fierce nature, along with Candika, as the text describes, "Kali, filling the regions of the sky with the noise from her bowstring, from her lion and from her bell, and expanding her mouth wide with her terrific roars, had the predominance" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 502), which intimidates the asura kings.

In the third episode, the Matrikas, or Mothers, also join the goddess, who are equally terrifying as Kali, and they kill the demons alongside Candika. However, when Rakta-vija, meaning "blood seed" (Marsman, 2019, p. 189), enters the battlefield, it is Kali who takes up arms since the Matrikas fail to contain the demon (Pargiter, 1904). Candika calls Kali, ordering her to swallow and drink the blood of Rakta-vija as she cuts the demon into pieces, so that the blood does not fall to the ground and create more armies of asuras (Pargiter, 1904). Kali not only drinks the blood of Rakta-vija but also consumes the new demons that spring from his blood. She continues to do so until Rakta-vija runs out of blood (Pargiter, 1904, p. 506), while Candika attacks the demon with all her weapons. DM states,

> The great Asuras, who sprang up from the flow of blood in her mouth, Camunda[121] both devoured them and quaffed his blood. The goddess smote Rakta-vija with her dart, her thunder-

[121] Here Kali is also referred as Camunda by Candika.

bolt, arrows, swords and spears, when Camunda drank up his blood. (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 505-506)

DM describes that after killing Rakta-vija, the band of Mothers or Matrikas, including Kali and Candika, dances "being intoxicated with blood" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 506). The violent imagery of the goddess is evident in how the text describes the forms of the goddess, including the Matrikas. The aggressive forms are described in DM with words like 'roars' (Pargiter, 1904, p. 499)," wide mouth", bloodthirsty nature, and "loud inauspicious laugh" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 507) that made the asuras tremble with fear (Pargiter, 1904, p. 508).

Forms like Kali, Candika, and Camunda stand out as they represent the divine feminine aspect of ferociousness, wrath, and anger. They are not the nurturers, motherly figures, but rather what the text defines as the goddesses of darkness, thirst, and hunger (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 490-491). The text emphasizes Kali as a reminder of the complexity in understanding the divine feminine. She, unlike other forms of the goddess, is not attractive for her voluptuous figure or her round breasts and curvy hips. Instead, the whole attention in DM is on her mouth, her roars, bloody tongue and eyes (Kinsley, 1987, p. 126), and her desire to kill. She is the opposite of benevolence, a deviation from the Hindutva's patriarchal conception of goddesses that highlights the goddess's motherly and wifely roles. Kali is monstrous and, as Kinsley described, "if mother goddesses give life, Kali feeds on life. What they give, she takes away" (Kinsley, 1987, p. 126).

The warrior imagery in the text suggests that the forms that are grotesque and wild are all part of the divine feminine. Kinsley notes that Kali has been associated either with battles or seen on the outskirts of Hindu society, depicted as naked, wild, blood-drinking, and wearing human remains as ornaments. She is revered by lower caste groups and worshipped in remote, wild areas (Kinsley, 1987, pp. 116-118). Including her in the text introduces the idea of regional goddess figures from the margins who are equally revered and represent powerful aspects of the divine feminine, challenging the upper-

caste, homogenous, Brahmanical notions associated with Hindutva representations. Kali's significance in the text blurs the line between peripheral and mainstream goddesses, a point I explore further in the next section on the Matrikas. By featuring Kali, DM challenges traditions and practices that suppress non-mainstream goddesses.

MATRIKAS AND REGIONAL GODDESSES

The Matrikas, or Mothers, referred to as energies or shaktis, form a crucial part of the goddess imagery in DM and are vital to understanding the plurality in divine feminine representations in the Hindu religious tradition. The inclusion of Matrikas and the different forms of goddesses like Kali and Camunda points to the incorporation of regional variations in goddess tradition in India (Kinsley, 1987; 1978). Kinsley notes that the Matrikas, or Mothers, are a group of goddesses associated with the more ruthless and merciless aspects of the goddess (Kinsley, 1987, p. 153). They appear in the third episode, during the slaying of the demon Rakta-vija, various forms or energies emerge from Brahma. Siva, Vishnu, and Indra to help Candika fight the asura army. These figures are jointly referred to as Matrikas, Mothers, or energies in the text.

The seven energies which appear from seven male gods are “Brahmani, Mahesvari, Kaumari, Vaisnavi, Varahi, Narasimhi, and Aindri” (Coburn, 1996, p. 38; Pargiter, 1904). Each energy carries weapons that are linked to the goddess’s nature and character. For instance, Brahma’s energy, or Brahmani, is depicted carrying an earthen water pot and a rosary of seeds (Pargiter, 1904). Mahesvara’s, or Siva’s, energy is shown positioned on a bull, holding a trident and wearing snakes. Kumara’s energy carries a spear and is positioned on a peacock. Vishnu’s energy carries a conch, discus, club, and scimitar as her weapons (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 502-503). Hari's energy is a “sacrificial boar” (Pargiter, 1904, p. 502). Indra’s energy came with a thunderbolt, who is seen riding an elephant and possessing “thousand eyes” (Pargiter, 1904, p. 503). The text also mentions another energy called

Sakra, but there is nothing said about that form other than its mention alongside other energies. Another fierce energy emanates from Candika, who is referred to as "most terrific" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 503). However, the name of the energy is not clear in the text. The energies ultimately merge into the body of the great goddess, the Mahamaya. It is evident when Sumbha accuses the goddess of treachery by bringing in Matrikas to fight the demons and expresses his doubt on her power and capacity as a warrior, the goddess immediately responds by saying,

> Alone verily am I in the world here; what other goddess is there besides me? See, vile one! that these goddesses, who have their divine power from me, are entering into me indeed.
>
> Then all those goddesses, Brahmani and the others, became absorbed into the goddess' breasts; Ambika then remained alone indeed.
>
> The goddess spoke:
>
> Whereas I existed with my divine power in many forms here—that has been drawn in by me, truly alone I stand now. Be thou steadfast in combat! (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 509-510)

The great goddess in DM is the shakti in whom reside multiple energies. Coburn notes that the text considers shakti*,* or power, as both 'singular' and a 'plural' (Coburn, 1996, p. 38). Singular for the fact that DM considers the great goddess as the only shakti and plural in terms of the depiction of Matrikas as energies of the great goddesses (Coburn, 1996). Each goddess is part of the diverse goddess tradition in Hindu mythology, encompassing the regional worship of the goddess (Kinsley, 1978). The Matrikas, also referred to as the "Sapta Matrkas" or Seven Mothers (Storm, 2006, p. 153), are seven angry goddesses representing the tantric tradition in Hinduism (Storm, 2006). They are addressed as *Yoginis*[122] and are worshipped in remote rural locations (Storm, 2006, p. 153). According to Mary Storm, these Sapta Matrikas also include Camunda and Kali (Storm, 2006). The Sapta

[122] Literal meaning is a female practitioner of yoga. However, here the word refers to the seven mothers who are part of the divine feminine and are fierce and powerful.

Matrikas, or the seven Mothers, according to George M. Williams (2003), have been related to the male figure Siva, and from a Brahmanical standpoint, they are understood as "destructive female energies" (Williams, 2003, p. 256) who bring misfortune, death, and disease (Williams, 2003). The Matrikas are first mentioned in the Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata* (Kinsley, 1987, p. 152). Williams notes that the Matrikas are present in both mythologies related to Siva and the goddess, the Mahamaya, and many of the features of the Matrikas are part of figures like Kali and Durga (Williams, 2003, p. 256). In the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, Matrikas are depicted as stepmothers of Kartikeya (son of Parvati), who are "inauspicious figures" and hurt children (Williams, 2003; Kinsley, 1978, p. 496). They are primarily associated with non-Aryans and are related to the figure Kartikeya, who is himself non-Aryan (Kinsley, 1978). The text associates the great goddess Mahamaya with both the periphery, such as the Matrikas, and mainstream figures, including Parvati, Gauri[123], and Lakshmi, giving equal importance to both mainstream figures and regional representations of goddesses. For instance, the text addresses the goddess as Gauri and Lakshmi, stating "(You are) Sri, whose sole abode is in the heart of Kaitabha's foe (Visnu); you are Gauri, whose abode is made with the one who is crowned with the moon (Siva)" (Coburn, 1992, p. 49).

The representation of the goddess in DM also includes forms that are controversial and debatable, like Parvati. Parvati, also known as Uma, is a gentler version of the goddess. In the Hindu religious tradition, Parvati is generally regarded as the consort goddess of Siva (Storm, 2006, p. 152). However, Parvati, who is said to be Himalaya's daughter, is a complex Hindu goddess because of her dubious motherhood status (Williams, 2003, p. 230). Although she is the wife of Siva and gave birth to two sons, Siva, as an ascetic, is not meant to engage in Karmic activities (Williams, 2003). However, being allured by Kama, the god of love, he married Parvati. Those of the Saivite tradition, who worship Siva as the supreme deity, do not accept Parvati's motherhood (Williams, 2003). Moreover, it is

[123] Gauri is a softer version of Parvati, wife of Siva (Williams, 2003, p. 233). See Williams, G. M. (2003). *Handbook of Hindu mythology*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, for more information.

believed that Parvati's sons can also be her creation, which is not part of the love play between Siva and Parvati (Williams, 2003, pp. 230-232).

Other than Parvati, DM includes Bhadrakali, who is another version of Parvati, angrier and more aggressive, as she appears from Siva's anger when he saw his wife being sacrificed in the fire[124] (Williams, 2003, p. 77). Kali is another controversial figure. Kali in Hindu mythology is the goddess of darkness, and she is said to be "the anger of Uma, or Parvati" (Williams, 2003, p.173). In the Vedic era, she is associated with Agni, the fire god, as one of Agni's seven tongues (Marsman, 2019, p. 185) and as the mother of Agni (Williams, 2003, p. 173). Apart from the Vedic tradition, in the mainstream Hindu religious context, Kali is understood as the darker aspect of the goddess. She is the goddess worshipped by dacoits, and her temples were initially located in forest areas and crematoriums (Marsman, 2019, p. 185). She is not a mainstream goddess and has been associated with the people living at the periphery (Kinsley, 1987, pp. 116-117). Kali is mentioned in the 5th century B.C.E. in the *Mahabharata* as the goddess of wrath and rage (Marsman, 2019, p. 185). Her name stands for darkness, death, and black (Marsman, 2019). Later, she appears in the text, *Devi Mahatmya*, where she is described in her ferocious form. She is not the 'orthodox' (Williams, 2003, p. 173) goddess, as she consumes meat and blood, and as part of her worship, includes sacrificing animals, which is still practiced in temples in Kolkata, West Bengal, and in Kali pithas (sacred sites) throughout India. Kali symbolizes both "tribal and non-Aryan" goddess forms (Williams, 2003, p. 173). Many village goddesses, who are often depicted as wild and untamed, are associated with Kali or Camunda (Williams, 2003).

[124] This is an episode in Hindu mythology where Parvati was born as the daughter of Daksha and named Sati. She marries Siva. Daksha, the father of Sati or Parvati, mocks Siva, which angers Parvati, causing her to sacrifice herself in fire, committing the act of Sati or self-immolation. Siva, witnessing her self-immolation, loses his anger, and from his anger, Bhadrakali, another form of Parvati, is born. (Williams, 2003, p. 232). See Williams, G. M. (2003). *Handbook of Hindu mythology*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, for more information.

In the tantric tradition, Kali worship includes offerings such as fish, wine, meat, and "sexual union" (Williams, 2003, p. 174). Her worship is not mainstream and, in most cases, is still not worshipped in households. Kinsley notes that Kali, as a goddess, is exceptionally well-known in West Bengal (Kinsley, 1987), whereas in other regions, Candi or Camunda is more popular. In West Bengal, Kali is worshipped every year during Diwali. Other than that, there are multiple dedicated Kali temples in Bengal where she is worshipped throughout the year in her rageful persona (Kinsley, 1987). A popular myth associated with the Kali figure, which is not included in the DM, is the imagery of Kali standing on top of Siva, her husband, who lies beneath her feet[125]. The explanation behind the imagery is that Kali was so drunk with human blood, and she was so much engrossed in her destructive dance that threatened the Earth, that Siva had to step in by lying down under her feet to stop her and bring her back to consciousness (Marsman, 2019, p. 190).

Unlike Kali, Candika, and the Matrikas, Durga, included in the text, is more of a mainstream goddess figure. Although if we see Durga's origin, she was initially the goddess of the periphery. Kinsley notes that her worship was popular among tribal or indigenous communities and is regarded as the goddess of non-Aryans, residing in the Vindhyas Mountains. She drank alcohol, blood, and all sorts of meat (Kinsley, 1987, pp. 95-96). Later, she was incorporated into the mainstream Hindu pantheon of goddesses, given the immense popularity of Durga as the slayer of a demon. There are multiple versions of the goddess Durga, who is depicted as Vishnu's sister, as wife of Siva, and as the lone untamed, fierce figure (Williams, 2003, p. 122). She is known in sixty-four forms, including Ambika, Kali, Kamakshi or "goddess of love", Parvati, Dakshina or "the goddess of the ritual gift", and Siva, the "goddess of sleep" (Williams, 2003, p. 122). The most popular myth associated with Durga is her Mahisamardini imagery, where she kills the asura Mahisasur. This myth is one of the three main episodes of DM. She is the goddess with "many faces" (McDaniel, 2023, p. 417). She is

[125] The version, Kali standing on Siva, is popular in Bengal and worshipped during the Kali festival.

incorporated into the Hindu goddess pantheon as a warrior figure (McDaniel, 2023, p. 415), which connects to the meaning of the word Durga in Sanskrit, meaning ‘durg’ or fort, connoting someone who cannot be defeated (McDaniel, 2023, p. 417). The goddess is worshipped in West Bengal in the form of a warrior figure, as well as Uma, accompanied by her children, Ganesha and Kartikeya. However, in DM, Durga only appears in her aggressive, wild form. She is beautiful, attractive, and desirable, but the focus is on her martial power and her skills. In DM, Durga does not come with her children. She is not depicted as a mother or a wife.

As the text narrates the various forms and Matrikas as part of the goddess tradition, Kinsley argues that by incorporating all these forms, *Devi Mahatmya* acknowledges the local goddesses that are part of the divine feminine (Kinsley, 1978, p. 505). The text makes it clear that the energies that emerged from the male gods to help her in the battle are merely part of one goddess, the Mahamaya (Pargiter, 1904). Equally important to note is that the Matrikas and other forms like Kali, Camunda, Candika, Ambika, Katyayani are not the consort goddesses, mother figures, or extended energies of the male gods. Coburn notes that the DM is cautious to avoid projecting the Matrikas and any other forms as consorts of male gods and does not use any direct reference that would suggest they are consort goddesses (Coburn, 1996).

The inclusion of Matrikas and different forms of the goddesses in DM presents a more diverse and rich imagination of goddesses rooted in the grassroots worship culture of regional goddess figures. Many figures mentioned in the text are not part of the Brahmanical, upper-caste religious practices. It includes debatable goddess figures, a wild, ferocious band of Mothers, and bloodthirsty goddesses such as Camunda, Kali, and Candika. *Devi Mahatmya* (DM) encompasses the ancient tradition of worship culture surrounding goddesses. It is evident when both King Suratha and the merchant, Samadhi, at the end offer their blood to the goddess as part of their prayers (Pargiter, 1904).

The Mothers are evidence of the pluralistic goddess imagery and tradition, showing that there is no one way of worshipping goddesses. Their presence conveys that there is not one figure, but many goddess figures, based on region, culture, caste, and ethnic background. Each of them is an equal form of the goddess, and none is inferior to the other. DM's use of varied names, forms, and shaktis acknowledges the diverse ritualistic traditions of communities from the periphery. The text's inclusion of regional goddesses stands in opposition to the parochial, upper-caste, and exclusionary vision of goddesses in Hindutva discourse. By incorporating the multiple forms of goddesses and the Matrikas, DM highlights the diversity in goddess imagery in the Indian religious landscape that is varied in terms of its geographical, cultural, and caste-based history of goddess worship.

EMPOWERING IMAGERY OF THE GODDESS

Beyond her depiction as an ambiguous and fierce warrior goddess, the goddess imagery in DM presents an empowering portrayal by emphasizing the goddess's supremacy and establishing the divine feminine as an independent figure. DM's portrayal of the goddess offers a counter-narrative to patriarchy-driven representations of goddesses and the ideal Hindu woman image portrayed by Hindutva nationalists.

In Hindutva politics, goddess figures are mainly associated with maternal or wifely roles, where Durga and Kali are worshipped and praised as mother goddesses who sometimes assume warrior roles. DM also refers to the motherly aspect of the goddess, especially in her role as the creator of the universe. However, her maternal role does not overshadow other facets of her character. The key features of her identity are her role as a cosmic queen, a lone warrior, and her fierce, wild forms. The text celebrates both the nurturing and the unruly, destructive imagery of goddesses and does not domesticate the disorderly goddess forms and the Matrikas. Instead, the text embraces the ferociousness and chaotic nature of the divine feminine, which cannot be confined to specific categories or fully understood. The text maintains that the goddess's power is boundless and infinite.

DM's representations of the goddess and her multiple forms break gender boundaries and Hindutva's ideal Hindu woman image. The goddess drinks liquor before and during battle. She takes pleasure in killing the demons, eating their flesh and blood, as seen in the figures of Kali, Candika, and Camunda. She roars, mocks, and laughs at the demon army. She resists efforts to limit her power and portray her as secondary to male figures (Kinsley, 1987). The regional and non-traditional depiction of the goddess and the Matrikas in the text challenges the idea of the virtuous Hindu woman promoted by Brahmanical patriarchy, as they are shown dressing freely, such as Kali, who appears nearly half-naked. The most striking feature is her bloodstained mouth and tongue.

The goddess and the Matrikas in DM engage in a battlefield, an arena traditionally reserved for men. They come to rescue men from the demons. The goddess and the Matrikas set their terms in the battle and fight the demons without using magical powers or deceptive tactics (Kinsley, 1987). The goddess is not the traditional Hindu woman who is docile, fearful, and passive. Instead, she is an active and central figure in the text, controlling the cosmic world and the universe (Kinsley, 1987, pp. 96-98). She is revered in her own right as a goddess. In the text, the male gods submit their fate in the hands of the goddess, praying and praising her to save them from the hands of demons (Kinsley, 1987).

The text emphasizes the goddess's dominance by consistently reminding the readers of the superior nature of her power. At certain points, her power becomes so absolute that it is beyond human and male gods' comprehension. DM states, "Thou art not known! Even by Hari, Hara and the other gods thou art incomprehensible!" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 483). The text highlights and repeats the failures of male gods and the most powerful among them, Siva, Vishnu, and Brahma, in protecting the universe. No male god could succeed against the demons or possess such immense power as the goddess. DM repeatedly uses the word "Great" (Pargiter, 1904) in describing the goddess's ultimate power and brilliance. The text describes the goddess as the sole creator of the universe, from whose body the universe is formed and sustained. She is the "knowledge supreme," the "final emancipation," and she is the "queen over all lords" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 469). The text addresses the goddess as the

Queen Supreme, Great Illusion, Great Memory, Great Vigor, Great Knowledge, Great Demon, Great Goddess, Great Night, and Great Fortune (Pargiter, 1904, p. 471). At one point, the text declares that Vishnu and Siva are created by the goddess (Pargiter, 1904, p. 471).

Other instances where the text indicates the goddess's supremacy are when the messengers Sugriva and Dhumra-locana, sent by Sumbha and Nisumbha, come to the goddess to take her with them. Moved by the beauty of the goddess, both Sumbha and Nisumbha wanted to marry the goddess and possess her like any other treasure (Pargiter, 1904). So, they sent the messengers to convey their feelings to her. However, the goddess rejects their proposal, stating that only those who can match her strength and power, and defeat her in battle, are eligible to be her husband (Pargiter, 1904, p. 496). Hearing this, Sugriva mocks the goddess's pride by daring to stand in front of the asura kings, whom no man could defeat, and says,

> Proud art thou! Talk not so before me, O goddess! What male in the three worlds may stand front to front with Sumbha and Nisumbha? All the gods verily stand not face to face with even the other Daityas[126] in battle, O goddess; how much less canst thou so stand, a woman single-handed! (Pargiter, 1904, p. 496)

Dhumra-locana also threatens the goddess that he will drag her by the hair if she refuses to come, saying,

> Come forward to the presence of Sumbha and Nisumbha: if thou wilt not, lady, approach my lord with affection now, I will here take thee by force, who wilt be unnerved since thou shalt be dragged along by thy hair! (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 497-498)

[126] Another name for demons.

However, the goddess rejects the proposal and challenges Sumbha and Nisumbha to a duel. Hearing this, when Dhumra-locana rushes towards the goddess, she kills him with a simple roar, emphasizing her dominance and superiority in power and strength (Pargiter, 1904, p. 498).

The asuras compare the goddess's battle skills to those of male gods and demons and doubt her ability to withstand their might. She is attacked clearly because she is a lone woman challenging the great male asuras (Kinsley, 1987). The goddess proves them wrong in every episode, defeating demons with her fist, breasts, roars, and bells. She stands alone with full pride and confidence, unafraid, and sets her terms in battle, challenging the asuras. Her presence and strength are intimidating to the male demons. In every fight, she overpowers the demons, diminishing their confidence and power. For instance, in the second episode, during the slaying of the demon Mahisasur, Mahisasur keeps changing his form from human to buffalo to elephant and back to human (Pargiter, 1904). The goddess is not intimidated by Mahisasur's magical tricks. She drinks alcohol and mocks the demon with her words, and declares that his end is near. The next moment, we see the goddess striking him with her spear and killing Mahisasur (Pargiter, 1904, p. 481).

In all the episodes, the goddess does not take the help of any male gods to fight the battles (Kinsley, 1987). For instance, when Siva himself lends his help to the goddess, she refuses and sends Siva as her messenger instead (Pargiter, 1904). However, she takes help from the female goddesses who are ultimately her forms and energies. She is far superior to male gods. For example, in the first episode, the goddess, as a great illusion, diminishes Vishnu's power, who is seen absorbed in a deep sleep, and he only awakens to consciousness when the goddess leaves Vishnu's body (Pargiter, 1904; Kinsley, 1987). Throughout all the episodes, DM shows that the goddess here is not a passive agent to the male gods, who give her power and strength, and she falls into a secondary role as a helper to the male gods. She is the primary agent, a saviour, a destroyer, and the creator of all human and non-human forms.

She is the only reality, as evident in the last episode, when Sumbha questions the goddess's power as she seeks help from the Matrikas, and all the forms instantly get absorbed into her (Pargiter, 1904). In the end, when all the battles are complete, the goddess commands the gods and other men to remember her stories of exploits and pray to her with offerings (Pargiter, 1904). If she is satisfied, she will come and provide a boon to the devotees. After saying this, as the gods praise the goddess and bow to her, she disappears (Pargiter, 1904, pp. 521-522). The text states, "Having spoken thus the adorable Candika, who is fierce in prowess, vanished there, while the gods were gazing indeed on her" (Pargiter, 1904, p. 521). The text does not specify where she vanishes, but she does not assume a secondary role as a consort goddess, merge into the body of a male god, or become absorbed as the energy of a male god. She does not take on a motherly or nurturing role after ending the battle. She vanishes in her fearful imagery. She is a fierce goddess, and if necessary, she will appear in her fierce form again to save the universe. DM glorifies the savage imagery, making it a constant factor throughout the text, reminding readers of the fierceness and dominating personality of the divine feminine.

The representations in the text are empowering not only in the sense that they present an authoritative imagery of the goddess and the Matrikas, but their powers are so extreme that the goddesses appear to be daunting. Apart from her menacing appearance and superior warrior skills, the goddess dismantles patriarchy through loud roars, laughter, sarcasm, and anger. These emotions play a central role in the depiction of the goddess and Matrikas in DM. In numerous instances, the text emphasizes the use of anger and the goddess's roars to scare the demons. During the creation of Durga, DM states,

> Honoured by other gods also with gifts of ornaments and weapons, the goddess uttered a loud roar blended with a horse-laugh again and again. The whole welkin was filled with her terrible roar. By that penetrating and exceedingly great roar a great echo arose, all the worlds shook and the seas trembled, the earth quaked and all the mountains moved. (Pargiter, 1904, p. 475)

In the fight against Mahisa, in the second episode, DM emphasizes the goddess's laughter, mocking the great demon lord, stating, “enraged thereat Candika, the mother of the world, quaffed a sublime beverage again and again, and laughed as her eyes gleamed ruddy” (Pargiter, 1904, p. 481). In the third episode, after Kali kills Canda and Munda and brings their bodies to Candika, DM describes Kali, stating, “her voice mingled with passionate loud laughter” after destroying the demons (Pargiter, 1904, p. 500).

Audre Lorde (1997) speaks about the transformative aspect of anger as she explores anger in response to racism and from the standpoint of women who are at the margins based on race, ethnicity, and gender. Lorde argues that anger can be constructive if it is exhibited and transformed into actions that have a liberating effect (Lorde, 1997, p. 280). Patriarchy has set up models for women to be docile and passive in their behaviour. Women are conditioned to “be nice, be sweet” and not to show anger (Mueller & Leidig, 1976, p. 24). If we examine the celebrated imagery of goddesses in Hindutva discourse, the role models set for women are not angry or disorderly goddesses and mythological female figures. Angry goddess imagery makes Hindu masculinity anxious. The female figures in Hindutva discourse are bound by a sense of domestic duty, honor, and values set by Brahmanical patriarchy. Hindutva politics prominently feature warrior goddess figures like Durga, Ashtabhuja, and Kali, but their powers are not unlimited. The focus is not on their anger. The focus remains on their nurturing duties, whereas anger is reserved for male iconographic figures, such as Ram.

Anger, loud roar, and laughter are deeply gendered. Nicole Graham argues that laughter is gendered in terms of what constitutes a “socially acceptable laughter” (Graham, 2024, p. 126) for women, which differs from that of men. Graham further points out that it is essential to recognise the gendered idea of laughter to pay attention to the limitations that women face in their experience of laughter (Graham, 2024). A similar argument can be applied to publicly expressing loud noise, anger, and other emotions that are restricted for women, even in domestic spaces. What I argue here is that the goddesses in the DM do not adhere to such norms. They are not afraid or driven by guilt in

expressing their anger, laughter, or roaring. The goddess and the Matrikas subvert the masculine display of power through those expressions. This is an empowering act as it resists patriarchy and ideas of a modest and docile woman. Through anger, loud laughter, and roar, goddesses show their power and commanding presence in front of the asura army. Janet Lee argues that anger can be empowering, as when women express anger, there is a question of 'self-assertion" (Lee, 1993, p. 15), as empowerment refers not only to "self-growth" (Lee, 1993, p. 15) but also understanding discrimination and how women can transform their situation (Lee, 1993). The goddess in the text DM repeatedly uses loud roars to suggest her powerful presence and wrath. Roar, meaning "loud deep sound" (Sharp, 2024, p. 7), is a way to express anger and pain, and is a way of being visible (Sharp, 2024, p. 8). In the final battle, when the Matrikas emerge on the battlefield to help the goddess, Nirsimhi and Siva-duti display their might and dominant presence through expressions of roars and laughter. DM states,

> And Nrisimha's Energy roamed about in the battle, devouring other great Asuras who were torn by her claws, as she filled the intermediate region of the sky with her roaring. Asuras, demoralized by Siva-duti with her violent loud laughs, fell down on the earth; she then devoured those fallen ones. (Pargiter, 1904, p. 504)

The expression of anger, roaring, and laughter stands in contrast to the silent and passive role associated with women (Sharp, 2024). The expressions also challenge the Hindutva politics' portrayal of the goddesses as a softer, tamed, and domesticated version, endorsing the idea of Hindu womanhood. In the *Devi Mahatmya,* the goddess and the Matrikas are loud, visible, and unruly dancing bodies that express fury, rage, and wild behavior, thus serving as empowering models for women.

CONCLUSION

The DM celebrates the conflicting and contradictory imagery of the divine feminine. She possesses unmatched power. She breaks, violates, and transgresses the normative gendered imagery of a good Hindu woman. There is no aspect of her depiction in the text that is similar to the one presented in Hindutva's narrative of the goddesses. Her representation is diverse, empowering, problematic, and at times violent. She is the "female cosmocrat" (Kinsley, 1978, p. 500), who is above Vishnu's power over the universe. She embodies the cosmos and is the creator of all. Although many Hindutva groups, such as the Samiti and Durga Vahini, portray Durga and Kali based on the *Devi Mahatmya*, these interpretations often do not capture the true nature and characteristics of the goddess and the Matrikas as described in the text. The imagery used in Hindutva discourse involves selectively contextualizing the warrior goddesses to promote the militant and aggressive roles of women only for the cause of Hindu nationalism. Women's powers are justified as long as they support Hindutva's goals and do not threaten the Brahmanical patriarchal order. The goddesses in Hindutva, besides endorsing women's militant roles in these groups, are also meant to serve as models of Hindu womanhood rooted in the patriarchal ideas of gender roles, modesty, honor, domestic duties, and family roles. The goddess in Hindutva's narrative is typically depicted as an upper-caste, fair-skinned, and obedient figure. Her compliant nature often outweighs her warrior aspect.

The divine feminine imagery in DM is not a controlled depiction of the goddess's powers and personality. She disrupts the patriarchal structure and gender norms. She challenges men's ability to fight her in battle. She mocks the demons during combat. She is not equal to men but far superior in terms of rank, power, strength, and martial skills. She does not conform to the typical Hindu female ideas of modesty and consumes liquor, blood, and meat. She shouts, roars, laughs, and dances amid the battle. The goddess in DM does not aim to portray an ideal role or image for women. She is complex, ambiguous, and powerful, and this is how she is presented in the text. She resides alone in

remote mountainous areas considered dangerous and has no male protector (Kinsley, 1987). The Matrikas in the text embody the active presence of various regional and local goddess forms that are absent from mainstream Hindutva discourse.

The goddess representation in the DM challenges Hindutva's representation by breaking the homogenous, patriarchal, and domesticated vision of the divine feminine. Her representation in the text transcends gender boundaries and subverts ideas of submission and acceptance of male authority, offering a truly empowering model for women. The text's representations remind us that the goddess stands for both creation and death. These opposite imaginations together form the complete understanding of the divine feminine.

Devi Mahatmya offers compelling evidence of the wide range of understanding of the goddess traditions in India, which is crucial to the broader argument of the research. It is not only an exploration of goddess imagery but also a counter-narrative to Hindutva's political use of the goddess, which ultimately portrays the goddesses in a narrow, parochial way. *Devi Mahatmya* challenges that narrative. The text serves as a rich source of goddess imagery. It offers a theological context necessary in recent times, when goddesses are used as tools to justify Brahminical patriarchy, religious nationalism, citizenship, and more. The text reminds us of the plurality and polarity inherent in Hindu goddess imagery, which is central to the goddess worship tradition in India. DM presents a textual challenge to Hindutva's idea of the goddess and signals towards the diversity of goddess perceptions present in the rich oral narratives of Hindu women, which I explore in my last two chapters, Chapter 5 and Chapter 6. The goal of these last two analysis chapters is to highlight the marginalized voices of ordinary Hindu women and their interpretations of the divine feminine, which differ significantly from Hindutva representations. In the next chapter, Chapter 5, I discuss women's personal stories, family history of worship, and rituals surrounding the goddess before highlighting the counter-narratives that emerge from women's oral accounts of goddesses, which I explore in my final analysis chapter, Chapter 6.

CHAPTER FIVE: BEYOND THE SAFFRON FLAGS: NARRATIVES OF ORDINARY HINDU WOMEN

INTRODUCTION

> *I'm starting to get serious about this because it is a serious and interesting topic, because, see, you know, when you're growing up in an Indian family, in a Hindu family, you don't have an option. Initially, you're just trained to worship goddesses and gods. You know, like the way your parents would [makes a hand gesture of namaskar] হাতটা নিয়ে বলবে নমস্কার করো*[127]*, just it had been with her, you know. Now you are on duty. So you are trained into that because you don't even do that knowing what you're doing, but you are just expected to do and you are trained to do, and then you are expected to just keep on doing it for the rest of your life. Now, just like any other Bengali kid, I was also trained to perhaps respect all gods and goddesses. (Maitali Chakraborty, March 13, 2024)*[128]

> *I think I have to mention two significant goddesses. One is Maa Kali, mainly Maa Kali, because I also have a family history with Maa Kali. Because the kind of family I come from, beyond my family, actually my family lineage, because we are worshipers of my Maa Kali, and we have a history of Maa Kali temple, and you know my parent, my forefathers worshiping and being priests of the temple. And from that they have got from this [temple] that they've given as part of some Zamindari. So that's why I grew up worshiping Maa Kali. And my father has been a great influence in that, actually. And so, yeah, but as you know, I grew up, I think the definition of Maa Kali has also, for me, has evolved over the years. I mean, as a child, it was different. As a teenager, it was different. And as I grew up, now I have a very different perspective about Maa Kali. And yeah, it's just keeps evolving over the years. And of course, Ma Durga. (Shuchitra Malakar, April 1, 2024)*

While sharing their interpretations of goddesses, Maitali and Shuchitra drew my attention to the everyday presence of goddesses in the lives of Hindu women, especially Bengali women, who grow up witnessing the worship of Kali, Durga, and Saraswati as part of their childhood. Maitali talks about her parents, who introduced her to the worship culture of a Bengali household. Like many women, she

[127] Take your hand and say namaskar.

[128] Identifying details like participant names, locations, and workplaces have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity, following the research's ethical guidelines.

was taught to respect and seek blessings from the deities. She is trained in the ritual aspects of worship with the hope of continuing the tradition. Shuchitra, a Kali devotee, admires Kali because of her family's history of owning a Kali temple and worshipping Kali. Her family's history of goddess worship is part of her childhood memories, which drew her toward Kali and goddess worship. However, Shuchitra notes that the understanding and perception of goddesses evolve throughout a woman's life. It is not a constant factor, even when indoctrinated into a specific worship culture, indicating that women also find their own ways to perceive the goddess as they grow older. In this chapter, I focus on the everyday presence of goddesses, understanding family worship, ritual practices, and how women develop their personal paths to remember and worship goddess figures.

In the previous chapter, I explored the goddess's representation in the text, *Devi Mahatmya*, examining the varied imagery of the goddess and Matrikas that sharply contrast with the domesticated, homogenous, patriarchal, and upper-caste version of the goddess in Hindutva discourse. The paradoxical, ambiguous, and empowering aspects of the goddess in *Devi Mahatmya* offer a non-conformist vision of the goddess through Kali, Candi, and Matrikas. These representations serve as a counter-narrative to the dominant portrayals of Hindu goddesses in Hindutva politics.

In this chapter, I shift the focus from the *Devi Mahatmya* to the lived experiences of ordinary women from West Bengal, India. The primary objective of my research is to examine goddess imagery in Hindutva narratives, *Devi Mahatmya*, and oral narratives of ordinary Hindu women, to see whether these images reinforce patriarchal gender roles or empower women. This chapter addresses the objective of the research by exploring women's stories and interpretations of goddesses, revealing the complex ways goddesses feature in the daily lives of women in Bengal.

Hindutva discourse representations, as discussed in Chapter 3, interpret goddesses in a linear, singular notion, either as a warrior figure or as a mother figure. However, in the warrior figure, the power of the goddess is not unlimited. The model of a nurturing mother is valued more than any

warrior imagery. In contrast to this understanding, the oral narratives of ordinary Hindu women from Bengal reveal a diverse, plural, regional, and paradoxical narrative of the divine feminine, which is absent in Hindutva's dominant portrayal of goddesses. Their perspectives convey the varied ways goddesses are remembered, reimagined, and interpreted by women, far from the way they are often imagined in temples and on saffron banners. To give more weight to the voices and perspectives of women, I divided the interview chapters into two separate chapters. The first oral history chapter, Chapter 5, focuses on the women's socialization with goddesses, the daily presence of goddesses in their lives, their family history of goddess worship, and the ritual practices surrounding the divine feminine. The next chapter, Chapter 6, explicitly explores how ordinary Hindu women resist Hindutva's idea of goddesses and ideal Hindu womanhood through their non-conforming, regional, and empowering imagery of the divine feminine.

Women's narratives of goddesses form a "human archive" (Novetzke, 2008, p. 25) of women's memories and recollections of goddesses that we do not come across in textual or mainstream political narratives like Hindutva discourse. I see these stories as living texts or archives that depict women's negotiation, resistance, subversion, and challenges through their diverse perspectives on goddesses. Like most Bengali women, including myself, I have grown up listening to stories of goddesses transmitted to us by our grandmothers, aunts, and mothers. From calendar art to incense stick packages and daily TV serials to Durga-themed outfits, including sarees, blouses, and dresses, goddesses are present everywhere in Bengal. Whether one believes in goddesses or not, in Bengal, it is almost a ritual to listen to the radio broadcast of the *Mahisamardini* (Durga) story on *Mahalaya*[129] every year. Bengal has a rich culture of goddess worship, both regional and mainstream, with the five-day Durga Puja and Kali Puja being the most popular. Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge, is worshipped every year in most middle-class households, and Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, is worshipped every Thursday in

[129] *Mahalaya* is the day when goddess Durga visits her maternal home. It marks the beginning of the five-day Durga Puja festival in West Bengal.

almost all households. There are also regional and local goddess figures like Manasa, Itu, Sasthi, and Sitala, worshipped by different communities, mainly from the periphery. Goddesses are not just part of the religious devotional tradition in Bengal. They form a crucial part of the culture and food that we see in the festivals surrounding the goddesses. This is why many of the women I interviewed, even if they do not always follow the goddesses in their everyday affairs, do not miss participating in the festivals surrounding the goddesses, as it is a vital part of their Bengali identity.

This chapter has two sections with subsections. The first section on the everyday presence of goddesses examines the family tradition of goddess worship and local goddess festivals that socialize women with the goddess tradition in Bengal. The section also highlights the stories and rituals passed down by generations that play a role in introducing women to the goddess worship culture. The festivals, family worship culture, and rituals convey the ways in which goddesses form an integral part of the daily lives of women in Bengal. The second section examines personal choice in goddess worship culture. This section highlights women's individual interpretations of goddesses and how they choose to connect with the goddess in their own ways.

SECTION 1 EVERYDAY WORSHIP OF GODDESSES

This section explores the everyday presence of goddesses in ordinary women's lives. The focus of this section is on the family history of goddess worship, stories, festivals like Durga Puja or Kali Puja, and rituals surrounding goddesses that socialize women with the goddess tradition. Caste, ethnicity, class, and region influence the family history of goddess worship, which presents alternative forms of rituals and regional goddesses, not part of the Brahmanical Hindu tradition. For instance, the responses of women I interviewed revealed the presence of ancestral goddesses like Rajrajeswari, Itu, Manasa, and the specific worship practices surrounding them in the households, along with the presence of mainstream deities like Durga, Kali, Lakshmi, and Saraswati.

The narratives of the women also showed how the stories passed down to them by previous generations introduced them to the goddess tradition. But, it was not only the family that transmitted goddess culture. Bengali culture and festivals also made important contributions to goddess socialization. Starting with daily household worship and extending to local goddess festivals and temples, both family and culture contribute to introducing the ritualistic aspects of goddess worship culture.

1.1 STORIES AND FAMILY HISTORY OF GODDESS WORSHIP

Ishita, in her mid-30s, living in the city of Kolkata, described her grandmother as playing an important role in her socialization with goddesses. As Ishita commented, *"I also grew up in a family where Durga Puja is a regular thing". (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)* For her, stories played a crucial role in understanding goddesses. Stories shaped her imagination of the goddess. Even though there is a tradition of Durga worship in her family, her first memory of the goddess dates back to the stories her grandmother shared with her. She recalled that her grandmother was a devout person whose world revolved around the ঠাকুর ঘর [*Thakur Ghor*[130]], and she would share stories about the goddesses. Ishita said,

> *ছোট থেকে[131], I think you're conditioning and the way you're growing up, and your cultural background play a big role. I, I think that has definitely been instrumental for me. যেটা বললাম আমার বাড়িতে[132], college first year থেকে আমার বাড়িতে দুর্গাপূজা হয়[133] / But even before that, I've grown up listening to stories from my grandmom. She's been a very pious lady, like most of our grandmothers. যার জন্য ঠাকুর ঘর[134]and one corner would be everything, and I would come back from school. I remember. And I would lie down beside her, and I would play with her arms fat, and she would tell me all stories of Mahamaya. So সেটা [that], and if I am, I'm very sensitive to my to body*

[130] Literal meaning is prayer or worship room. A common feature in most Bengali households where all the gods and goddesses are kept and worshipped.

[131] Since childhood.

[132] Like I said, my home.

[133] We practice Durga worship at home.

[134] For whom there is a worship room.

> *sensations and I think I feel most alive and sensory. When I, as a child, when I listen to her stories and my imagination would become very vivid, very palpable. And there was a time when this world, her world, would be my escape. And the sensations that I had in my body when I'm listening to those stories, how I feel, and I mean who wouldn't choose something that makes you feel best? So yeah. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

Ishita mentioned the Sakta devotional practice[135] when speaking about her family history and her brother's inclination towards goddesses. Her brother started the family tradition of Durga puja because he was a devotee of Durga. His love for goddesses and the Sakta tradition also played a role in socializing Ishita with goddess culture. She said,

> *মানে আমার বাবার দিকে মায়ের দিকে136, everyone has been a lifetime appreciator of the Sakta pathway of spirituality is something that I could, I can say. মানে কেউ খুব deep delve করেনি137, My Dada [brother] obviously who's a classical musician or vocalist and also under whose initiative Durga Puja started in my maternal family, well, he has been very like a, like a deep devotee towards goddess and goddess culture. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

Adrita Chowdhury, a director from Kolkata, has seen her mother and grandmother as deeply devoted individuals. Her introduction to the goddess happened because of her mother and grandmother. She stated,

> *And maybe you can see out now on the other side, things that mom has instilled in me has a lot to do with Ma's idea of the goddesses. (Adrita Chowdhury, June 17, 2024).*

For Kabita, a teacher and academician by profession, family played a role in her socialization with the goddess. Kabita's account revealed how goddesses transform into daughters, sons, mothers, and friends who are treated with the same love and intimacy as any other family member. Kabita said,

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[135] The literal meaning of the word is derived from the word shakti, meaning power. Sakta devotional practice refers to a religious system that worships goddesses as primary deities, and it is an important branch of Hinduism, just like Saivism, which worships Siva as the primary deity (Cush et al, 2008, p.733). See Cush, D., Robinson, C., & York, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (1st ed.). Routledge, https://doi-org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/10.4324/9780203862032 for more information.

[136] From my parents' side.

[137] Never explored Shakta ideology that much.

> *There are definitely some influences from my family and my surroundings because from my childhood I found my parents very, very much, you know, worshipping the goddesses. And there are so many Hindu images in our household, deities that they are also in what we call our ঠাকুর ঘর [worship room]. So, it's a regular practice when we are just conceptualizing the goddesses as part of our family. They are like our family member. They are providing them lunch, breakfast, dinner. So, these things are very much common in a common Bengali household. They're like a part of the family. We call them daughter, son, or, somehow, they are daughter-in-law. Lakshmi, so many goddesses are there everywhere I can see in the calendars, panjika138, you can see the pictures are there. But somehow the external influences are definitely on me. (Kabita Duttagupta, June 22, 2024)*

Kabita pointed out that when it came to goddesses, she was drawn to *Shyama sangeet* (devotional songs of Sakta or Kali worshippers) because of her mother's family, who are traditional Sakta worshippers. Her mother's family is worshippers of Maheshwari Kali[139]. She said,

> *I'm very much fond of, you know, the Shyama sangeet. And from my childhood, I used to learn Shyama sangeet. It's from a teacher, from a classical musician. And somehow my mother, they are traditional Saktas, you know, they are in this Duttagupta [family surname changed] family. So, she used to tell stories that her grandfather's grandfather they have a long tradition of what should be this goddess Kali the Maheshwari Kali from Bangladesh right now. The tradition is there, and big tantric tradition what she used to tell me that they were carrying on. That influences that sort of, you know, upbringing, what I got, the lessons, what I received from my parents, that to be very much devoted to that goddess. (Kabita Duttagupta, June 22, 2024).*

Similarly, for Apu, a corporate employee, family played an important role in her introduction to the goddess tradition. Lakshmi Puja is something that her family does every year on a grand scale. She said,

> *Ah, there is no particular reason. You, I feel that the way we are grown up. Okay. So, it, I mean, I feel that family plays a very important role here in my house, and there's regular worship happening every day. There's no particular reason that I can explain. But there I can see that there's been instances and families of me have played a big role. ছোট থেকে যেভাবে বড় হয়েছি, পুজো দেখে বড় হয়েছি140. (Apu Bose, June 24, 2024)*

Kumari Dey, a retired professor, stated that her mother was a religious person. She lived in a joint family most of her life before marriage. She saw her relatives performing worship rituals at home.

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[138] Hindu religious calendar.
[139] A local or regional version of Kali in West Bengal.
[140] I grew up seeing worship from young age.

She mentioned that although her mother was religious, she was not much into ritual practices. Like any other Bengali family, they had a *Thakur Ghor* or worship room. Even though she was not as religious as her relatives, she continued the family tradition of having a *Thakur Ghor* at her place after she got married. Her husband was also a devotee of Kali, and to respect that, Kumari followed the practice of puja (worship) at her home.

Shonali Roy, a teacher by profession, living in a small town on the outskirts of Bengal, discussed her parents' worship of gods and goddesses. She said,

> *So to begin with, I was born and brought up in a middle-class household where all I could see from the very beginning, my parents being devout followers of Goddess Kali. So, both my parents, they were devout followers of Goddess Kali. And in our household, like every other middle-class Bengali Hindu household, we also had this, Thakur Ghor [worship room]. As they call it, where you have all the gods and goddesses, and there were many, in fact. So as a child, I was initiated into, like, worshiping the gods and goddesses in general. I used to, you know, perform the regular rituals till, I mean, I was old enough, to, to get busy with my studies, but otherwise, that was a regular practice. I was the one in charge of worshiping and being, doing all the ritualistic chores, to worship the gods and goddesses. (Shonali Roy, February 15, 2024)*

Shonali mentioned that although her parents worshipped all gods and goddesses, she later developed an affinity for Kali because Kali is the most powerful figure among all the other deities. It is also because she saw her father's devotion to Kali, who worshipped the goddess with profound sincerity and dedication. She stated,

> *I could see my, my, parents, especially my father, paying his tribute to the goddess and always, you know, even during general conversation, just, just. What should I say? Loudly saying, মা মা গো[141]. So, whenever he used to say as part of his conversation, I knew that he was referring to Goddess Kali. That was there. (Shonali Roy, February 15, 2024)*

Shonali further stated how her family viewed Kali as a protector. For her family, Kali embodies the strength necessary to face life's challenges. Her family's perception of Kali influenced her understanding of the goddess. She said,

[141] A way of calling the goddess.

In fact, this was like a very, obvious thing for us to know that whenever there is a problem in life, there is this one goddess to whom you can go, you can submit yourself and, seek for some positive energy, the power to encounter any difficulty in life. (Shonali Roy, February 15, 2024)

Sraboni Dutta, vice president of a corporate company, was introduced to many forms of the goddess Durga by her family, especially her mother. She mentioned,

So it's something that I was taught when I was a kid, that this is what you have to do. And by taught, I mean that there was this one ritual that we always had to do was give anjali on Ashtami[142]*. And after that there were like these various avatars of Durga you know, be that Kali or Jagadhatri or Parvati or Candi any of, any of those versions of it. (Sraboni Dutta, January 27, 2024)*

Mimi Bose, a postdoctoral fellow in her mid-30s, does not practice any religion. Her family does not observe any ritualistic practices. However, like any other Bengali household, certain traditions, such as Saraswati Puja, are observed by her family. Mimi loves to take part in this annual family tradition of worshipping Saraswati. She said,

A particular instance that I can give you is that of Saraswati. Because I come from a family where people have been in academia. My father was the professor of Bangla [Bengali language] in a college. My mother was also a professor of History, completed her PhD. So, I think that's a family tradition, which I've continued. And even if I'm not a believer, but I do take part in the ritual worship of Saraswati once a year. So, you know, when it is that time of the year to worship her. (Mimi Bose, January 17, 2024)

Madhu, a young research scholar in her late 20s, pointed towards the aspect of family traditions that women inherit and continue to practice in domestic and public spaces. She said,

I think worshiping a goddess has more to do with tradition or inheritance rather than your personal choice. I experienced if, like if my, my previous generation did something, create a festival around Goddess Kali or Goddess Durga, then I think it is automatically inherited in me that the next generation will keep on doing that that, you know, keep on doing that same festival or worship as the, as a principle of value and a discipline. (Madhu Haldar, June 29th, 2024)

However, these family traditions vary, as we have seen with the family history of worshipping Kali, followers of *Shyama sangeet*, and Sakta devotionalism. For instance, Pari Ghosh, an educator living

[142] Ashtami is the most auspicious day of the five-day Durga Puja festival, during which most devotees make offerings to the goddess. Anjali is the act of offering flowers to the goddess.

in Kolkata, spoke about her love and affection for the goddess Rajrajeswari, who is an ancestral goddess figure. Worshipping of Rajrajeswari is a family tradition and an important part of Pari's life. She said,

> *For Rajrajeswari, I think I never had it. So it was, it was like a way of life. Because since she's my ancestral goddess, and every year, like, once in every year, we used to go to an ancestral place to kind of, for that celebration. Right. So, we knew that it's going to be, it's our way of life, like the winter vacation, is our way of life. Going to ancestral home for this event was a way of life, and I cannot not think of my life without that today. (Pari Ghosh, July 16, 2024)*

Subha Chatterjee of Kolkata has her version of the Kali idol, which she worships every year at home. The form of Kali she worships sits on the lap of Siva unlike the popular forms of Kali's representation. She is not a firm believer in religious rituals, but her reverence for Kali persists as part of her familial tradition, given the idol's significant connection to her family history. Subha said,

> *কারণ আমার বাড়িতে কালীপুজো হচ্ছে তিপ্পান্ন বছর ধরে। আমার কষ্টিপাথরের কালী মূর্তি আছে। এবং এই মূর্তিটার পেছনে ইতিহাস আছে। কারণ আমার মা স্বপ্ন দেখেছিলেন যে মায়ের যে ancesters, ভাবো 200, 250 বছর আগে যখন মুসলমানরা ভারতবর্ধ আক্রমণ করেছিল, তারা বলতো যবন। যবনদের হাত থেকে মা কালীকে রক্ষা করার জন্য, তখন যে ancester ছিলেন, পুকুরের পাঁকের তলায় গেঁথে দিয়েছিলেন। সে হয়তো মারা গেছে, somehow ওখান থেকে আর তোলা হয়নি। মাকে একদিন স্বপ্ন দিয়েছিলেন। মা কিন্তু school teacher। এমন নয় যে মা ঠাকুর দেবতা নিয়ে থাকতেন। আমার বাড়িতে লক্ষ্মীর পটও ছিল না। So আমার মাকে স্বপ্ন দেখালো, 'আমাকে তোল'। এবং সেটা একটা অদ্ভুত মূর্তি। তোমাকে দেখাবো, ছবি পাঠাবো। সেটা হচ্ছে শিবের কোলে কালী*[143]*. (Subha Chatterjee, December 29, 2023)*

Subha discussed her mother's devotion to Kali and how she worshipped her, despite cultural restrictions in Brahmanical Hinduism that typically limit the main ritual to male Brahmin priests. However, Subha's mother broke that custom to worship Kali her way. Subha continued her mother's tradition because she felt a deep connection to the Kali idol. Subha was introduced to Kali puja at

[143] Because Kali Puja has been happening in my house for fifty-three years. I have a Kali idol made of touchstone. And this idol has a history behind it. Because my mother had a dream that her ancestors, imagine 200, 250 years ago, when Muslims attacked India, they were called Jabans, to protect Mother Kali from the Jabans, the ancestor at that time had buried the idol deep under the mud in a pond. He might have died; somehow, it was never retrieved from there. One day, Mother Kali gave my mother a dream. My mother is a school teacher. It's not like she used to be engrossed in gods and goddesses. We didn't even have a Lakshmi pot at home. So, Mother Kali appeared in my mother's dream and said, 'Retrieve me.' And it's a very unusual idol. I will show you, send you a picture. It's Kali on Siva's lap.

home when she was eight years old, and she would fast during Kali puja. When talking about her continuation of the Kali worship tradition after her mother's death, she remarked,

> *এটা দেখো, এটা দীর্ঘদিন ধরে চলে আসছে পুজোটা। এটা একটা tradition। মা যখন মারা গেছেন, এই পুজোটা ধরিয়ে দিয়ে গেছেন। এটা আছে। এবং সারা বছরই ধরো আমি কিন্তু ভেতরে ভেতরে ফিল করতে থাকি। এই power বের করবার জন্য আমি তৈরি হই*[144]*. (Subha Chatterjee, December 29, 2023)*

1.2 RITUALS

Rituals, apart from family history and stories of goddesses, play a crucial role in the socialization of women with goddesses. Rituals performed by families are passed down to the younger generations in Bengali households, who continue this practice in their daily lives. These rituals also vary based on ancestral goddesses, caste, community, region, or religious belief. For example, the worship of Rajrajswari is different from the worship rituals of mainstream goddesses like Durga or Kali. Another example is Subha's worship of the unique idol of Kali that we do not find in the mainstream depiction of the deity. The ritual she performs during Kali Puja breaks the Brahminical tradition of male priests doing the worship rituals. Subha, like her mother, continues to do it on her own. For instance, Suhana Sengupta, a journalist living in Kolkata, shared a distinctive way her family worships Lakshmi and Saraswati. Although her family is not religious, her father has a spiritual inclination but does not follow formal religious practices. They conduct the worship without following traditional Brahminical rituals. Suhana explained,

> *We also, I must say, though, that we did have the usual Saraswati pujo and once a year Laksmi pujo. But they were largely, I'd say they were largely fun exercises with no, with absolutely no Brahmin purohit came into the house. There was no stress on maintaining any rituals, nor did anyone fast in the house. So, it, and sometimes my mother would read the Panchali*[145]*, and then she would, it would be, but it would almost be like the members of the house would gather and see they are present that would be it. It was a*

[144] Look, this worship of Kali has been going on for a long time. It's our tradition. When my mother passed away, she gave this responsibility to me. And throughout the year, I feel the power inside me, and I prepare myself to release this power.

[145] Panchali is a collection of songs and stories, mainly religious and based on folktales that women recite orally during the worship of goddesses such as Lakshmi.

sort of a fun exercise. And then sometimes I remember a few years when my mother was ill, I was the one to read the Panchali for no good reason. I mean, would ask a teenage girl to read and to do such an important ritual, important, so to speak, ritual. But then that was not a big deal in the house, which I realize is a little strange now. But then that is how it was. (Suhana Sengupta, March 29, 2024)

As we have seen previously, women who are not religious still maintain or take part in traditions like Saraswati Puja because that is something their family has performed. For instance, Anisha explained how her family used to worship Lakshmi and Saraswati, and she would also join in the rituals, even though she is not a religious person. For her, rituals are more about tradition than devotion. She considers them part of Bengali household culture and continues to practice them. Anisha commented,

I participate in ceremonies, festivals, or religious festivals. Durga Pujo, actually in my house from childhood I, we just have two functions in my house that is Lakshmi pujo and Saraswati pujo regularly. So, push করে কিছু করিও না[146] / পুজোয় অঞ্জলি[147] *everything that Bengali culture that we used to conform* সেগুলো আমি করি[148] / *I love to spend time in Durga Pujo in Kolkata. (Anisha Guha, June 22, 2024)*

Emphasizing the practice, Anisha further notes,

লক্ষ্মী পুজো [Lakshmi worship]is also a kind of practice because from class 4, I guess, I, I used to do the rituals with my mom, so that's the practice. It's not always about the beliefs, but it's about the practice, like এই বছর করবো না[149]? That's the thing, regular basis একটা [one] practice. (Anisha Guha, June 22, 2024)

1.3 CULTURE, PLACE, AND FESTIVALS

The narratives of women highlight the cultural and religious importance of the region, which influences the socialization of women with goddesses. For example, Bengal is known for its rich

[146] I don't do anything out of pressure.

[147] Puja offering.

[148] I do all that.

[149] Won't do this year?

goddess tradition. It is famous for its annual festivals celebrating goddesses like Durga, Kali, and Saraswati. Durga Puja is the most popular among them. Local communities worship Durga by creating pandals[150] with different themes. The goddess Durga is also worshipped by zamindars (landlords), following a tradition that spans over 100 years. Bengal also has several well-known shakti pithas (sacred sites) and temples dedicated to different forms of Kali, like Tara and Candi. Additionally, the region is recognized for local or regional goddesses like Manasa, Bonobibi, Itu, and Rajarajewari. Bengal's culture is deeply connected with goddesses through genres of devotional songs like Shyama Sangeet and Uma Sangeet, popular genres of devotional songs dedicated to goddesses. All these factors contribute to socializing women with goddesses.

Most women spoke about Durga Puja as a significant festival and part of Bengali culture that introduces women to the goddess tradition. Even women who are not religious do not miss the anjali on the day of Ashtami[151], as it is part of the festive culture as a Bengali. Apu, a corporate employee from Kolkata, stated that goddesses are an integral part of Bengali culture and emphasized that there is no single event that introduces women to goddesses. Goddesses are present everywhere. She stated that attending Durga Puja with friends and family members is a common practice. Anisha was introduced to goddesses through Durga Puja, apart from her family. She is not very ritualistic, but she is drawn to the festival celebrating the goddess, Durga. She takes part in anjali to offer flowers and pray to Durga.

Ishita spoke about Candi's worship in her community festival in Bengal. This form of Candi is not widely practiced in any local pujas (worship) or even household pujas. Ishita notes that the form of Candi can be found in the text *Devi Mahatmya*, but it is not well-known in terms of popular goddess

[150] Pandals are temporary structures built during Durga Puja in Bengal.

[151] Ashtami is considered the most auspicious day to offer flowers to the goddess Durga.

worship festivals like Durga or Kali Puja. She frequently visited the local Candi festival (puja)[152], which also played a role in her imagination of the goddess. She remembered attending Candi's festival at a well-known zamindar's (landlord's) house in Kolkata, renowned for its ancient and traditional worship of Durga, which had been practiced for over 100 years. Both the outside influence and the domestic spaces of worship contributed to her relationship with the goddesses. Ishita further mentioned that Durga Puja is one aspect of her introduction to the goddesses. Her family and the place where she lived had a profound connection to the goddess from the beginning. She mentioned the cultural side that shaped her understanding of the goddess. Ishita said that she is a dancer, and the creative world introduced her to the goddess Saraswati, who is the source of all creativity. In connection with the creative aspect, like Bengal's art on goddesses and the teachings she received, she explained,

> *Influences have been there, of course. My teachers and my, I am, I also teach history of art, so you can imagine, like Bengali art, Bengal art, all these things have been a very deep inspiration and influence in my life and Bengal as well as Indian art and culture is incomplete without Krishna and Kali. So ছোট থেকে153 when I'm growing up seeing all these and they touch me deeply. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

Shonali discussed in her interview the significance of sacred sites, temples, and local festivals in Bengal that influence people's ideas of the goddess. She stated that aside from household worship of the goddess, there are temples named after different forms of the goddess Kali, such as Tarapitha[154]

[152] The literal meaning of 'puja' is worship. However, in Bengal, the term also refers to religious festivals or places of worship.

[153] Since childhood.

[154] Pitha means sacred site. Tarapitha is one of the shakti pithas, or sacred sites of goddess powers, believed to house a part of goddess Kali. It is a well-known pilgrimage location in Birbhum district, Bengal, India.

and Kalighat[155]in West Bengal, India. In Bengal, there are *Sharbojanin pujas*[156] in local areas or neighborhoods. While there are individual puja traditions at home[157], in local pujas, people from the region come together to participate and celebrate the festival. It carries a different locality-based tradition that is followed every year. Shonali said,

> *I could see her being worship in my house only, in my home. And then in the local surrounding. She is being celebrated even till date in my own para [neighbourhood]. Okay, so all the households, who are living in the same para, in the same lane, they are contributing to make arrangements for the early celebration. So that celebration is like yearly celebration during the Kali Puja, she is being celebrated where pandals get erected and all those households, they come together, the, you know, they lend their utensils which are reserved for that puja only okay. And everything, every, people from all the households, they come, they actively participate, distribute the works amongst themselves. That form is also there. (Shonali Roy, February 15, 2024)*

Shonali mentioned that her hometown, on the outskirts of Bengal, has a special connection to Kali because it is the place of Ramprasad Sen, who was a dedicated devotee and a pioneer of *Shyama sangeet*. She said,

> *And let me tell you that this [name of the village] is the place where we have the mandir of Sri Ramprasad. Ramprasad Mandir is a very famous place. So, Goddess Kali, if Goddess Kali is celebrated across Bengal, then I would say that two people who are mostly responsible for this is the first person is Shri Ram Krishna. The great devout, believer of Goddess Kali. And the second person would be, of course, Shri Ramprasad okay, now Ramprasadi gaan, Ramprasad songs, these are very popular even today. Whenever if you visit, West Bengal, wherever you go during Kali Puja, the song which generally is played that is Ramprasad songs. Okay. So that is the place where I belong to. We are grown up, we have grown up listening to Ramprasad. So, in fact, I used to study in a school which was just beside Ramprasad's Ghat. So, you know, there is this Gangar Ghat which is in the name of Ramprasad and it is very close to Ramprasad Mandir okay, which is one, which itself has a very kind of a heritage value. So, in a way, everyone in my surroundings, besides my school, when I was a kid, everywhere I could see that people, you know, celebrated, overtly Kali puja, and then, they also, there was this practice of learning Ramprasad Songs. That was also there. Okay. We, we used to visit Ramprasad Mandir for worshipping. That was also there. So, all of this, I think, had a huge impact on me when I was a kid. So, I can't really figure out when I was*

[155] Kalighat is another shakti pitha where it is believed that goddess Kali's foot has fallen. The Kalighat temple is in Kolkata, Bengal, India.

[156] This refers to a local festival that is open to all devotees.

[157] Individual puja includes Durga Puja by Zamindars in West Bengal and also individual family worshiping the goddess at home.

> *initiated into the process of worshiping the goddess. It came to me naturally, and it was very much a part and parcel of the surroundings in which I was brought up. So yeah. Naturally. (Shonali Roy, February 15, 2024)*

Shonali could not remember any particular reason for her adoration of Kali, but the place, Ramprasad's music, her house, and the neighborhood played a role in her socialization with Kali. The place she lived remembered Kali through the songs of Ramprasad and as a mother, a protector, and a family member.

Besides Kali, Shonali's family also worships the goddess Manasa, the serpent goddess, who is their ancestral deity and a regional goddess figure. This worship of Manasa is connected to her family's roots in Bangladesh before partition. According to her, Manasa was a popular figure in that region in Bangladesh due to the area's geography, known for its rivers and snakes. Since goddess Manasa is the snake goddess, her worshippers pray to her for their safety. However, after her family moved to this locality in West Bengal, they leaned more towards Kali than Manasa. The regional significance of Kali played a crucial role in her and her family's inclination towards the goddess. Shonali discussed Manasa's link to her family's tradition of goddess worship, saying,

> *My grandfather, I mean, our family, I, actually rooted in a place called [name of the region], which is now in Bangladesh. Okay. So, my grandfather came to India in around, 1949, 1950. So, before that, they were living in Bangladesh. Okay. And, [name of the region] is a place where actually Goddess Kali is not that popular. It's a place where Goddess Manasa, she is very popular. So, in a way, if you ask me, then, in the lineage, Goddess Manasa was more renowned than Goddess Kali. (Shonali Roy, February 15, 2024)*

Shonali's response indicated the importance of region, place, and culture in socializing women with goddesses. Although family members, their worship tradition, and stories introduce women to the goddess in domestic settings, it is the cultural aspects, like festivals and the regional significance of goddesses, that contribute to the understanding of goddesses in the lives of ordinary Hindu women in Bengal.

1.4 IDENTITY

The narratives also convey that the family worship culture, rituals, and goddess festivals are more than the socialization with the goddess tradition. It is also linked with identity, especially when it comes to the ancestral or regional goddesses. For instance, Pari worshipping the goddess Rajrajeswari was more than just following her family's traditions. Her focus on the “way of life” (Pari Ghosh, July 16, 2024) indicates that her worship of the goddess is closely linked to her identity and sense of self. It is not something imposed on her, but a vital part of her existence, without which she cannot imagine living. For some participants, the worship culture served as an introduction to goddesses and a way to build relationships with goddesses. However, for participants like Pari, family’s worship practices are more than that, as they defined their identity and drew them towards it.

In most cases, women have followed their families' practices out of discipline or respect for longstanding traditions, culture, and roots. In doing so, these women discussed alternative rituals specific to their region, family history, caste, and community. These rituals do not necessarily match Brahmanical Hindu worship rituals, where a Brahmin priest usually leads the ceremonies, for instance, the case of Subha and Suhana, who do not follow the Brahmanical way of worship. This variation in ritual practices challenges Hindutva’s Brahmanical Hindu idea of goddesses and worship culture. The Hindutva framework of goddesses erased the subtlety and variations in everyday practices by presenting a homogeneous Brahmanical idea of goddess worship. The variation in rituals in women’s narratives undermines the homogeneous idea of Hindutva groups.

The narratives revealed different versions of goddesses and regional figures that are part of the family’s history of goddess worship, which the participants continue to observe in their lives. For example, Subha’s depiction of Kali differs from common portrayals. She presents Kali as Siva's daughter, unlike the typical image of Kali as Siva's wife. Shonali shared her family’s worship of Manasa, their ancestral deity, linked to their memories from Bangladesh before partition. She also described how her family was influenced by Kali’s imagery after moving to a new place where Kali

worship is prevalent. Pari mentioned Rajrajeswari, who is deeply connected to her identity and family history. The narratives show that *Thakur Ghor* (worship room) is a permanent place in most Bengali middle-class households, serving as a space where women engage with the goddess. Whether through stories shared with the next generation or rituals performed, *Thakur Ghor* is a place where the goddess shifts from a distant deity to a friend and family member. The goddess is given a room in the household, along with food, flowers, clothes, and shelter, by family members. However, there is also a subtle aspect of personal choice that women addressed. Following or worshipping the goddesses, both mainstream and regional, is not always routine. Sometimes, women shared how they selectively remembered certain female goddess figures and continued to believe in them based on their personal understanding of the deity. The following section discusses women's personal beliefs in the divine feminine.

SECTION 2 HER WAY OF WORSHIP: PERSONAL CHOICE BEYOND BRAHMANICAL RITUALS

> *If I am worshiping the Goddess, that would be my personal choice. (Kabita Duttagupta, June 22, 2024)*

While the first section emphasized women's socialization with goddess narratives through stories, rituals, festivals, culture, and family history, this section highlights women's exercise of choice and autonomy in forging a connection with the divine feminine. The narratives reveal an underlying defiance of following Brahmanical rituals and rigid understandings of goddesses, as seen in Hindutva's portrayal of goddesses. It is not always tradition that leads women to worship goddesses. Many women prefer adhering to a specific deity over others. In choosing whom to remember and worship, women exercise power, shaping their relationship and connection with goddesses outside the Hindutva framework and Brahmanical patriarchal standards. It highlights a complex relationship with goddesses rooted in interpretation, beliefs, feelings, independent choice, and rejection of Brahmanical ritual

practices. The ritualistic aspect in this section addresses women's acts of performing devotion or remembering goddesses that transcend notions of purity, impurity, and orthodox rituals.

2.1 PERSONAL CHOICE

Although we might understand personal choice in terms of feminist literature on women's agency, in this context, it has a unique significance. The women who participated in my research were crafting a space of resistance against the Hindutva framework through their exercise of choice in remembering and worshipping the goddesses the way they want to. Their resistance is expressed through their personal ways of defining their connection with goddesses, who are sometimes a friend, a daughter, or a mother to the women. To many other women, the goddess is also a power. By not adhering to the Hindutva's homogenous notions of goddesses, women created their own ways of understanding the divine feminine. It is in this context that I highlight the aspect of personal choice that women expressed in their interviews. The subsection includes women's exercising of choice, a direct resistance to Hindutva's imposition of goddess stereotypes on women.

Kabita emphasized the word personal and said,*" I say, of course it's my personal choice." (Kabita Duttagupta, June 22, 2024)*. In her interview, she explained that she doesn't follow a set time or ritual. Her story shows that she has a say in who she follows and that she has made her own choices about how to worship the goddess and how she connects with the goddess figure. Kabita stated,

> *So, I don't need, I don't feel the need to follow those very regulations in a very typical, stereotypical manner. It's not like that. If I am worshiping the Goddess, that would be my personal choice. That would be in my personal way because she is my mother. When I was you, being the goddess in a particular auspicious occasion, I, she is my like my mother. So, I am her daughter. So, it's my choice in whatever way I really call her. I will kiss her. I will scold her, feed her. So, these are completely on myself. So, I would not follow any ritual thing. What is the need of doing that? so that's my perception. (Kabita Duttagupta, June 22, 2024)*

Her relationship with the goddess is that of a mother and daughter, free from rituals or formalities. She relishes the freedom in how she treats the goddess. There is a sense of equality. When Kabita describes the goddess as a mother, she feels she can kiss her, scold her, or call her anytime. This relationship, as

Kabita explains, breaks the hierarchical gap between the divine and the devotee. Her depiction of the goddess as a mother figure may suggest categorizing the goddess as a mother goddess. However, her view of the goddess as a mother is less about placing her in a traditional category of mother and warrior goddess and more about rejecting Brahmanical rituals. Kabita's rejection of formal rituals emphasizes the right to determine how to worship or remember goddesses on one's own terms. The defiance is more pronounced when Kabita said,

> *Generally, I do that puja time. But it's not that if I feel, in a Sunday morning I, okay so I took bath and I just started reading from the text. It all depends on my mood. Not like that I have to do this a particular day or tithi[158], but it's like whenever I feel like I do it. (Kabita Duttagupta, June 22, 2024)*

By text, Kabita refers to religious scriptures or Panchali (religious poems or stories), often read as part of rituals. Kabita reads when she wants to. She is not directly criticizing the rigidity associated with worshiping goddesses. However, her emphasis on words like 'choice', 'pleasure', and 'mood' highlights her rejection of standard practices surrounding goddesses. It is not a compulsion for her to perform certain rituals every time she worships the goddess. Kabita believes that reading texts can be a form of worshipping the goddess. She refused to categorize it as a ritual because it is more related to the aspect of pleasure. She experiences a sense of satisfaction when reading those texts. Kabita remarked,

> *I try to read out from the text of Chandi (Sri Sri Chandi[159]) on the day of Ashtami or Nabami[160], particularly the Devi Suktam[161], and I like to read it out from those texts and I chant some mantras after taking baths. So, I would not call that this is a kind of a ritualistic affair, but I do this out of my own such pleasure. My pleasure. I love to read the text. I somehow feel very much devotional. I feel very much sacred on that particular moment when I am chanting from the text, I wouldn't call that this is somehow I'm worshiping the goddess. It's not like that, but it's a personal satisfaction. I cannot explain it in words. This is an experience. This is a kind of inner cognition, what I am*

[158] Tithi refers to a specific time or date in the Hindu calendar and is considered auspicious for worship.

[159] Sri Sri Candi is formally called *Devi Mahatmya* or *Durga Saptashati*.

[160] Ashtami and Nabami are the two days of the five-day Durga festival celebrated in Bengal.

[161] Devi Suktam is a powerful hymn dedicated to the goddess.

doing. So that is how I observe the rituals are what we call it. (Kabita Duttagupta, June 22, 2024)

Ishita is a therapist, well-being enthusiast, educator, researcher of the divine feminine, and a Sakta practitioner. Her decision to follow, remember, and worship Kali is a personal journey to understand the divine feminine. Focusing on her personal journey, Ishita opined,

Yes, it's like a completely personal, like, the whole, my whole journey with whatever little that like tiny drop I have experienced about goddess, the goddess is completely personal. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)

Debolina admires Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge. No one forced her to follow the figure. Her relationship with Saraswati differs from the traditional give-and-take concept, where one offers books to the goddess in exchange for academic success. Emphasizing the word 'choice', Debolina mentioned that her appreciation for Saraswati is because of the goddess's appearance, her wisdom, and her graceful nature. Debolina said,

Saraswati is my choice because I used to like her because, you know, initially I used to in my initial days, I was not very much into studies and I didn't want, I, it was not into like, Saraswati please give me this first, make me, make me first, then I will give you this. It's to bargain. But I used to like settings with the, I think, because of her you know that সে তো শুভ্র[162], that white colored and very sophisticated look, and very dignified. You know, she's doing nothing, but she is doing everything. That kind of aura she had. That's why I was attracted. (Debolina Maitra, February 22, 2024)

Pari's account reveals a clear reason behind her decision to worship goddess figures. Pari discussed her choice not to follow male gods like Ganesha, Krishna, and Siva, who are very popular deities on television and in households across India, not just in West Bengal. Ganesha and Krishna's younger forms, Gopal, are especially popular among women. It is easier to follow these figures, considered the most powerful and well-known among all gods and goddesses. Their images are everywhere, in shops, TV shows, calendars, and matchboxes. Women often fast on most Mondays to

[162] She is pure and white.

pray to Siva, hoping to find a good husband. But Pari deliberately chose not to follow these male gods and instead worshiped Rajrajeswari and Kali. Her decision shows a defiance of the traditional patriarchal thinking that male gods are primary and most powerful deities. For Pari, the goddess is the leader and the primary deity in her life. Highlighting her personal choice, she argued,

> *Yep, definitely, I could have chosen Bishwakarma or Karthik or Ganesh. I had that opportunity. Ganesh is so cute. So, I had all those opportunities to them, you know, to reach out to them. Siva is so handsome. So, you know, we have those opportunities to kind of seek. Because when you also as like we are born in patriarchal society, if we see a leader, we close our eyes and we see men. We, we don't see women. I'm also seeing he, I'm also talking about majority. So, I think, I think we, as I'm sure you or many of our friends, we have taught ourselves to kind of also see women as leaders. Right. But we taught that to ourselves. Nobody taught that to us. So as a child, I had the opportunity to look up to Siva because he was so handsome. And to Ganesh, I remember watching a serial called Krishna. So, I had an opportunity to be a friend of Krishna. I did try to, not that I don't, but yeah, ultimately, I chose to choose them instead of choosing that. Yeah, it was my acceptance towards what I feel for myself and I want to feel for others. (Pari Ghosh, July 16, 2024)*

Sraboni mentioned in her interview that her belief in Durga is a personal choice. She said,

> *It's like I personally, I personally get attracted or gravitated towards strength. You know, anyone who exudes any sort of strength, I just immediately get drawn to that. And that's what Durga had always been. Like when God could not do anything, it was time for the goddess. So that had always kind of played a huge, important role for me to, you know, to push me through this maze of life. (Sraboni Dutta, January 27, 2024)*

She further stated,

> *. But yeah, it was a personal choice when I chose this particular Goddess to be like the guiding path. (Sraboni Dutta, January 27, 2024)*

Sraboni viewed her relationship with goddesses as a personal matter and focused more on connecting with the goddess's power in her own way. She emphasized words like ‘personal’, ‘informal’ to describe her relationship with the goddess, devoid of formal worship practices. She said,

> *So that was one of the things that I was taught that always do Ashtami anjali. And that was the only formal worship that I ever did apart from that formally, I will, I won't say that I have ever like, you know, folded hands and always, you know, prayed to God or*

did সন্ধ্যা[163] or, you know, ধূপ কাঠি[164]. Not like that. My relation with God or goddess is very personal. It's very informal. It's not like I have to put up a show to show that I am worshiping them. It's there somewhere in me and I consider that to be a part of me. So it's like, you talk to yourself and I talk to that power. So, I keep on like, you know what This is happening. I need some strength. I need some sort of direction. I think that I'm losing myself. What I think that I'm getting involved in so much of problems. So how to come by it? Or I am worried about my parents. So, whatever these things, it is not like that. I'm sitting in front of the idol, and I'm like praying to her, but it's much more informal than that. It's like I'm just talking to them in my mind. I'm not formally doing anything. (Sraboni Dutta, January 27, 2024)

2.2 REJECTION OF RITUAL, PURITY, AND IMPURITY

While discussing the personal choice in worshipping and remembering goddesses, women also expressed their resistance against Brahmanical patriarchal rituals and ideas of purity and impurity of women's bodies by distancing themselves from formal ritual practices. This is a resistance against Hindutva's framework of goddesses that support Brahmanical patriarchal models of ritual worship. Women shared how they connected with the goddesses outside the Brahmanical orthodoxy and gender norms, forming a deeper bond with the goddesses in their lives. While many women participants criticized the concepts of purity and impurity by citing instances of non-Brahmanical practices surrounding goddesses, others simply refused to follow formal rituals to worship the divine feminine.

Nancy T. Ammerman argues that gender influences religious practices and rituals, and vice versa (2021, p. 91). She discusses orthodox Judaism and Islam, which have separate worship spaces for men and women, shaping how prayer practices are conducted for each gender (Ammerman, 2021). Patriarchy is embedded in orthodox religious practices that impose a "system of dominance" (Ammerman, 2021, p. 91), which influences what women wear and imposes restrictions to ensure "sexual purity" of women's bodies (Ammerman, 2021, p. 91). Such religious practices support and reinforce gender hierarchy, limiting women's access to religious freedom, while focusing primarily on

[163] Evening prayers.

[164] Incense stick.

women's bodies to maintain sexual purity as part of community's religious norms (Wadley, 1977; Bevilacqua, 2017). For example, in orthodox Brahminical Hinduism, the concepts of purity and impurity are linked to women's bodies. Women are considered "impure and sinful" (Bevilacqua, 2017, p. 54) because of menstruation and childbirth. In the Brahminical tradition, women are expected to perform rigorous ritual practices to attain a state of purity (Bevilacqua, 2017).

During the interviews, women challenged the ideas of impurity and the taboo around women's bodies in Brahmanical Hinduism when discussing the Kamakhya Temple in Guwahati, India. This temple, one of the sacred shakti pithas or sacred sites dedicated to the goddess, questions the traditional separation of purity and impurity in orthodox Brahmanical rituals. It is believed that Candi's vagina or *yoni* is worshipped in the Kamakhya Temple. The temple hosts an annual festival called *Ambubachi*, which celebrates the menstrual cycle of the goddess and is regarded as a sacred ritual. Women participants addressed the paradox that Candi's menstruation, celebrated at Kamakhya temple, is accepted publicly, yet similar taboos around women's bodies still exist in Brahmanical Hinduism.

Madhu views *Ambubachi* as a subversive ritual. It challenges the idea that women's bodies are either clean or impure. It rejects Brahmanical patriarchy. Madhu said,

> *So, when I talk about the body, I think Goddess Kamakhya can't be disassociated from that very discussion. The narrative it has, the narrative it has to offer, is that it is very relatable because to talk about Kamakhya, I mean, there's a temple of Kamakhya in Assam, Guwahati, and you will see that once in a year, which is the time called Ambubachi. So, it is a tenure of three days, and it is a tenure when Goddess Kamakhya menstruates, and we'll see clearly the blood coming out of the temple in the three days. So that was initially very, you know, very sublime to me. Like, I believe it because how can a god menstruate? Whereas we saw the very beginning you know, when, when I was just hitting puberty, I was taught that menstruation is a stigma, you know, and I think it's, I will, I will be honest in that during menstruation, I can't do certain things, you know, I can't enter the temple in my house and touch things which are considered to be holy or do certain religious activities. Right? So, I was like, menstruation and religion can't come together. So, if you're menstruating, you have to take yourself away from all the activities, all the rituals, and you can't do anything about it. You know, even there's a conception that I can't cook because whatever I cook that will be the, I will serve that to my father or my elder ones, and they can't eat it because I was going through this period. So clearly it was a stigma beyond the biological thing. But when I see Goddess Kamakhya who is herself menstruating and the temple's been closed for*

three days, nobody can enter into that temple. So, I was quite astonished, well, so how come this narrative that the goddess is menstruating go with the other narratives where women are having menstruation, and they're like, how can this? How can this make sense together? So that is something that's taught me about the very conception of menstruation being equally shared by the Goddess. The, the kind of stigma that we attach to menstruation is something, I think this religious. This Ambubachi has a subversive aspect to it. (Madhu Haldar, June 29, 2024)

Ishita highlighted how she never followed formal rituals in her worship of Kali. For her, it is not about ritualistic worship of Kali or emulating her but about exploring her, getting to know her, understanding her, and growing closer to her. She said,

Kali pujo যদি আমি দেখি[165] in the ritualistic tradition, she is a demanding goddess. I mean that the worship of Kali is probably one of the hardest ritualistic pujas that you can do. So, I've never, হ্যাঁ, জবা ফুল দেওয়া[166], just sitting and connecting with her is different, but I've never really worshipped her. What I, has been doing or maybe, what the thirst that I feel within myself, is truly to understand and experience what has been written about her, what has been given to us about her already, and through that, if I can like at least attempt to reach to her a little more. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)

Adrita stated that participating in orthodox rituals is also linked to perceptions of good and bad, especially for women. Once, Adrita went on a date with a man who was surprised that she did not follow religious rituals, given her Bengali background. Adrita expressed her disappointment, saying,

I'm not going to go in front of an idol and, you know, do নমো নমো[167], I'm not that person because it's end of the day for me, it is one of many কাদা দিয়ে বানানো একটা মূর্তি[168]. So, then the date did not end well for this conversation. But these are the qualities that has been given to these ideas of Kali and Durga. (Adrita Chowdhury, May 22, 2024)

Anisha expressed her strong dissatisfaction with the orthodox rituals and the concepts of pure and impure associated with women's bodies. She performs a few pujas, but only based on her own willingness and not out of pressure. Furrowing her eyebrows in irritation, Anisha remarked,

[165] If I see.

[166] Offering her flowers, particularly Hibiscus.

[167] An expression of showing respect to the gods by folding hands.

[168] Nothing but an idol made of mud.

> *কারণটা হচ্ছে আমাদের বাড়িতে কখনো খুব একটা অমুক দিন নখ কাটা যাবে না, এটা করা যাবে না, এইভাবেই তো কুসংস্কারগুলো grow করে, তো ওইগুলো ছিল না। If you feel এটা করবে তো করো, তোমার যদি মনে হয় পুজোয় বসবে তো বসো। I followed rules that periods don't worship God, but তুমি যদি feel করো, আমি শেখাবো না to follow my path, but তুমি যেটা ইচ্ছে করো। ছোট থেকে যেহেতু এইগুলো ঢুকে গেছে সেজন্য rituals ব্যাপারটা আমায় খুব একটা attract করে না। আর আমার মনে হয় rituals সাথে superstition , there is a connection between the two. ওইজন্য আমার পছন্দ না*[169]*. (Anisha Guha, June 22, 2024)*

She firmly rejected such rituals because most are driven by superstitions. She did not believe in the ideas of idol worship culture. According to Anisha, if rituals play a central role in the worship of goddesses, who are considered superior to human beings, and if goddesses are affected for not following all rules and maintaining purity, resulting in bad luck, then the question is: how different are the deities, anyway, from human beings? She raised the question, saying,

> *এই যে মঙ্গল আর অমঙ্গলের concept rituals practice করার পেছনে, এই ব্যাপারটা আমার পছন্দ নয়*[170]*। যদি একটা supernatural power থাকে, he or she is holding our good যে ভগবান সবার মঙ্গল করে এটা universal truth, তাহলে কিছু follow না করলে আমার অমঙ্গল হতে পারে না। তাহলে সে আর মানুষের সাথে*[171] *what's the difference? (Anisha Guha, June 22, 2024)*

70-year-old widowed Kumari Dey lives alone in Kolkata. For her, religious practices haven't played a significant role in daily life. If she finds a ritualistic aspect to be patriarchal or orthodox, Kumari chooses not to follow it. For example, the Panchali (religious text comprising of poems) that women read during Lakshmi worship at home is something she finds problematic because it differentiates between genders and expects women to act as good wives, mothers, and daughters. Kumari said,

[169] In our home, we never set any rules or rituals because that can lead to superstitions. If you want to perform worship, then do it, or else do not. There's no pressure. If you feel it, do it. If you want to worship, then do it. Do whatever you like to do. I will not teach you to follow my path. Since there was no ritual practice at home, all these things do not affect me. And I think so rituals and superstition, there is a connection between the two. This is why I do not like it.

[171] The concept of auspicious and inauspicious in ritual practice, which I do not like. God thinks about everyone's well-being. If I do not perform certain rituals, then bad things will happen to me. If God thinks like that, why should I worship God?

> *মা লক্ষ্মীর পাঁচালী আমি পড়ি, বলে পাঁচালী না পড়লে পুজো complete হয় না। কিন্তু Thursday পুজোটাতে আমি পাঁচালী পড়ি না। এই কারণে পড়ি না কারণ পাঁচালীতে যে সব কথাগুলো বলা হয় যে ভালো বউ, হাউজওয়াইফদের লক্ষণ হিসেবে, আমি সেগুলোর সাথে একদমই একমত নই। ভালো ভালো বউদের যা যা করতে হয় সেটা আমি agree করি না, তাই পাঁচালীটা পড়ি না। এমনি পুজো করি আমার মতো করে*[172]*. (Kumari Dey, December 27, 2023)*

At the age of 70, when society expects widows to dedicate their lives to religion and rituals, Kumari rejects all of it. She added, saying,

> *আমি about 70, 69+ বটেই। এই বয়সে মানুষের দীক্ষা নেবার ইচ্ছে হয়, লোকে মঠ-মিশনে যায় খুব ঠাকুর ঠাকুর করে, কথায় কথায় কপালে নমস্কার করে, আমি তো সে সব করি না, করার ইচ্ছেও হয় না, আর করি না বলে যে খুব একটা guilt feeling হয়, তাও তো না*[173]*. (Kumari Dey, December 27, 2023)*

Aging widowed women in India are expected to dedicate their lives to religion. They are supposed to spend the rest of their days in devotion to God. Jatin Pande and Manish Gupta (2019) note that Hindu women in India are considered "auspicious' (Pande & Gupta, 2019, p. 92) when they are married, but are seen as "inauspicious" once they reach widowed status (Pande & Gupta, 2019, p. 92). Widows are generally expected to live a life of perpetual mourning for their husbands, devoid of sexual pleasure, personal food preferences, or any material attachments (Pande & Gupta, 2019). It is the aged widows who are tasked with maintaining the age-old values and customs, and passing them on to the next generation (Guha, 2025). All of this is part of a Brahminical patriarchal system that views women as repositories of caste purity, sexual purity, and chastity (Chakravarti, 1993). Madhurima Guha notes that it is often older women who assume the roles of ascetics within the Hindutva movement, primarily responsible for preserving religious traditions and upholding the principles of the Hindu nation (Guha, 2025). This is seen in figures like Uma Bharti and Sadhvi Rithambhara, who embody spiritual

[172] I read the Ma Lakshmi's Panchali because it's said that without reading the Panchali, the puja isn't complete. However, I don't read the Panchali during the Thursday puja. I don't read it because I completely disagree with the descriptions in the Panchali about the qualities of a 'good wife' or a 'housewife.' I don't agree with what good wives are supposed to do, and that's why I don't read the Panchali. I just perform the puja the way I want to.

[173] I'm about 70, 69+. At this age, people often want to get initiated. They go to missions (religious institutions), become very devout, and constantly remain dedicated to God. But I don't do any of that, nor do I feel like doing it. And I don't feel particularly guilty for not doing it either.

authority and morality (Basu, 1993). Their 'ascetic' status (Dasgupta, 2023, p. 3), coupled with old age and celibacy, positions them as authority figures who can influence young Hindu women.

Amrita Basu observes that both Uma Bharti and Sadhvi Rithambhara are elderly ascetics who have maintained a celibate lifestyle and aligned themselves with orthodox Brahmanical Hindu notions of purity, female chastity, and gendered modesty (Basu, 1996; 1993). They renounced not only material attachments but also sexual pleasures, achieving a "moral superiority" (Basu, 1996, p. 72). Vijayraje Scindia, if not an ascetic, is an elderly, celibate widow who dresses in white sarees, a common practice among widows in India (Basu, 1993, p. 26). These three women have taken on the role of Hindutva leaders, instilling orthodox Hindu values and customs among both women and men. They uphold the Brahmanical patriarchal model that Hindutva supports. However, Kumari refuses to fall into the stereotype of aging widows who live a religious life and serve as gatekeepers of tradition, rituals, and values. Her refusal to submit to patriarchal gender norms, along with her indifference to orthodox ritualistic practices, underscores her rejection of Brahmanical patriarchy. Kumari performs puja according to her free will. She sarcastically commented,

> *অনেকে অনেক কিছু নিয়ম মানে। আমি এইসব শুনে চমকে যাই। আমি তো এত জানি না নিয়ম কানুন। আমি এই ক'মাস আগে জানলাম যে শিব ঠাকুরের মাথায় ৭টা আতপ চাল দিলে বাবা নাকি খুশি হন। আমি তো জানতাম না। আমার থেকে কম বয়সী কয়েকটি বউ খুব মন দিয়ে আলোচনা করছিল। আমি একটু দেখে একটু inferior complex ভুগি যে সবাই কত জানে পুজোর নিয়ম। আমি জানি না আর জানতেও ইচ্ছে করে না*[174]*. (Kumari Dey, December 27, 2023)*

Madhabi Mondol, a young researcher and professor in her mid-30s, is from a scheduled caste background and married into an upper-caste family. In her daily life, she refuses to follow Brahmanical rituals, a deliberate choice that is part of her caste politics. She does not believe in rituals. Her husband

[174] Many people follow a lot of rules. I'm just surprised to hear all this. I don't know much about rules and rituals. It was only a few months ago that I found out that offering seven grains of rice to Lord Siva makes him happy. I had no idea about that. A few younger women were discussing it very intently. When I see that, I feel a little inferior because everyone knows so much about rules. I don't know them, and I don't even feel like learning them (the rituals).

visits the temple, but she does not. For her, it is an activity, not a sign of devotion. Shonali places more importance on the connection she feels with Kali than on ritualistic traditions. Her renunciation of the orthodox ritualistic practices is her defiance of Brahmanical patriarchal traditions. She commented,

> *I have evolved a lot. I have renounced the faith system, you know, way in my life. But I could still connect to that source of power, the source of energy in her. And so, I have started looking at her as that, source of agency that still can empower me in a way. So, maybe I have renounced the rituals or the ritualistic, customs which are prescribed or which people, do follow. Generally, I don't go to a mandir [temple] to pay my tribute. I probably do not do the ritualistic chores on a regular basis these days. But, as I said, the emotional connect is still there. (Shonali Roy, February 15, 2024)*

2. 3 LIVED RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

Apart from personal choice and rejection of rituals, women rejected Brahmanical ritualistic practices by redefining worship and creating their own rituals to connect with the goddesses. Women's different practices or ways of engaging with the goddess form part of the lived religious practices, which are embedded in the exercise of autonomy, where women decide how they want to communicate with the goddess or worship her. Their lived religious experiences are a rejection not only of Brahmanical patriarchy but also of Hindutva's power to dictate women's relationships with goddesses.

Women's informal ways of worshiping and rituals, such as sadhana[175], meditation, conversation, or reading sacred texts, are part of their lived religious experiences. Lived religion refers to the "religion of the ordinary people" (Ammerman, 2014, p. 190) that happens outside the formal religious institutions (Ammerman, 2014). It includes people's daily habits like eating, dressing, and their perspectives on death, birth, sexuality, and appearance, such as the use of body art, tattoos, and hairstyles (Ammerman, 2014). As Nancy T. Ammerman defines it,

[175] A disciplined practice to attain a spiritual goal.

> Lived religion may include the spaces people inhabit, as well-the construction of shrines in homes or in public places, for instance. And it includes the physical and artistic things people do together, such as singing, dancing, and other folk or community traditions that enact a spiritual sense of solidarity and transcendence. (Nancy T. Ammerman, 2014, pp. 190-191)

Ammerman notes that the lived religious practices performed in everyday life are not always 'labeled' as religious by religious institutions or as part of broader cultural practices (Ammerman, 2021, p. 29). However, they are defined as religious by those who practice them daily (Ammerman, 2021). For example, Sraboni has a dedicated corner in her room where she practices meditation, focusing on the three eyes of the goddesses, representing Hell, Heaven, and Earth. For her, it is a ritual or a way to connect with the goddess. Through meditation, Sraboni accesses the goddess's energy, power, and strength. She said,

> *If you want to know that if I follow any, you know, like cultural or contemporary norms, No. But I do a couple of other things that I like. I have a meditation bowl, so I will ring that. I will, you know, play that on that meditation bowl. And I used to make this manifestation corner sort of thing. So, when I'm manifesting and when I'm talking, it's not like that, it's the universe. But to me the universe is through that, through those three eyes. You know, those three eyes used to make a lot of sense to me স্বর্গ, মর্ত্য, পাতাল[176]. That is what I associate with it. (Sraboni Dutta, January 27, 2024)*

The same applies to women who describe in interviews how they engage in informal conversations with goddesses while doing household chores. These actions women observe or perform in their daily lives are ways they connect and interact with the goddess, outside the traditional ritualistic practices prescribed by religious institutions. What is important to note is that these lived religious practices challenge Brahmanical patriarchy, caste, and class norms (Ammerman, 2021, p. 45), as well as Hindutva's framework of goddesses.

[176] Heaven, Earth and Hell.

Religious practices serve as tools to maintain caste, class, and gender hierarchies (Ammerman, 2021, pp. 17-18). The social categories intersect with religious identity and tradition, creating different religious experiences for women. For instance, women observe fasting for their husbands' longevity in certain worship rituals in the Hindu tradition. When discussing the lived religious practices of ordinary women, it is essential to consider different social categories to understand how women challenge Brahmanical patriarchy through their everyday religious actions. Also, the embodied practices women perform to connect with the goddess are significant. Ammerman notes that "lived religion begins with the fact of embodiment" (Ammerman, 2021, p. 75), meaning that any religious practice, whether prayer, chanting, singing, or meditating, is experienced through our senses and bodies (Ammerman, 2021, p. 75). This aspect is especially crucial for women, as women's bodies are the site through which patriarchy and power operate, and where caste, class, and religion regulate women's bodies and religious experiences.

When women take charge of rituals, refuse orthodox practices and ideas of purity and impurity, and invent their own lived religious practices, regardless of caste, class, ethnicity, or gender, they challenge the hegemonic patriarchal system and the power that seeks to control their expression. Lived religious practices and embodied experiences (Ammerman, 2021, p. 81) empower women (Ammerman, 2021, pp. 77-78). While speaking about lived religious practices, Ammerman notes that lived religious practices can be the opposite of "powerlessness and domination" (Ammerman, 2021, p. 91). Such practices may convey "embodied experiences" (Ammerman, 2021, p. 81) that can be empowering for women like Muslim women 'freely' choosing to wear hijab to show their 'power' over patriarchy (Ammerman, 2021, p. 91). In my research, the women's personal ways and practices of engaging with the goddesses challenge the Hindutva framework. Women's exercise of power in redefining worship and forming informal ways of interacting with the goddess is a challenge to Brahmanical Hinduism. It takes away the power from Hindutva groups to define how and whom women should worship.

Ishita engages with the goddess through sadhana. For her, sadhana is a religious practice that involves activities such as yoga, chanting, and meditation, during which her body experiences a sense of vibration in a deep meditative state, which she calls her mystical space. There is a bodily experience connected to her sadhana that allows her to connect with the goddess. Ishita said,

> *So family দুর্গাপূজা হয়েছে[177] । কিছু জিনিস শিখেছি[178] । Conceptually জানি[179] । But for me, like I said, it has been a very personal and intimate journey with the goddess and এবং আজকের দিনে যখন যেই[180] form appealing to me, or is really needed for me in that moment, I, I have that connection so or I can reach out to that connection. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

For Ishita, sadhana and her devotion to Kali are an intimate and private affair. She does not adhere to a single form of Kali or Candi. Instead, she chooses one based on what appeals to her at the moment and how connected she feels to that form. Her nature of worship shifts from the traditional worship style to one where she has a direct connection with the divine feminine, one that is built through her sadhana. She further added, emphasizing the aspect of the personal and intimate relationship with the goddess,

> *I am on a personal explorative discovering journey with the form of Kali. This is not something that I usually am, talk about, this is not a very public aspect of my life. This is a very personal aspect of my life, which is why the topic of this interview was indispensable for me. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

For Ishita, her understanding of the goddess stems from her knowledge of shakti, which embodies the goddess's power. She commented,

> *There's no end to it, but I'm quite obsessed to know, learn, study, experience, and internalize Shakti is what I would say. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

[177] My family performed Durga Puja.

[178] I am learning.

[179] I know.

[180] In today's time, many forms appeal to me.

As part of her ritual surrounding the goddess, Ishita reads shakti literature[181] , *Kalika Purana*[182], *Upanishads*[183], and *Devi Mahatmya,* and practices sadhana. When asked about her practice, Ishita was hesitant to share details, noting that it is very private and she prefers not to disclose it. However, sadhana is a key part of her connection with the divine feminine, transporting her to a space where she feels closer to the goddess. Highlighting the ritual of sadhana, she stated,

> *Shadhana is a very mystical place. You know, when you really meditate and when you are in that zone, when you're learning, receiving, absorbing, it's a very juicy space. It's very palpable, very juicy, very consuming. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

Regarding the practice and rituals, Ishita further added,

> *Practice নিয়ে বলা সম্ভব নয়[184] /. Even I know I understand that you will maintain every confidentiality possible, so maybe I'll not get into the details of it, but last one 1 and 1/2 months maybe, I've not even been so regular with the practices, but yes, I do have a set of practices which connect me to the goddess on a very physical, emotional, psychological level. There are yoga asanas that are very connecting to the goddess. There are breath work which are very deeply connected to the goddess. I read certain things. I also perform chanting that is also there. So, there are of course there are things which I do because this is also something very delicate, very, very subtle. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

Shuchitra Malakar, a woman in her mid-30s and a professional classical dancer, experiences the goddess through her dancing. For her, dance is sadhana, a ritual, a medium through which she experiences the goddess's energy in her body. She feels this energy when portraying the goddess in her dance acts. She said,

> *It's such an energy. And to kind of explain it in words, it's just you have to realize it. And it may be sometimes through my sadhana of dance also because, you know, in dance also, I have too many a times have to portray Maa Kali and Maa durga. So you*

[181] Shakti literature refers to the sacred texts and religious scriptures dedicated to the divine feminine power, like the Puranas, such as *Devi Mahatmya* and *Devi Bhagavata Purana*.

[182] A Purana on Shaktism.

[183] The Upanishads are the foundation of Vedanta philosophy.

[184] I cannot say anything about practice.

> *have to feel the Goddess to be enabled to portray that in order to be able to portray that. And it's a very deep down realization and a connection that you have to form through this goddess, with this goddesses to be able to portray. No matter when you feel portraying a male god, then also you have to have a connection. I mean, I remember portraying Hanuman and that's very different journey and yeah, so and I remember also had portrayed once Maa Durga. So you have to have certain amount of connection to be able to portray that. (Shuchitra Malakar, April 1, 2024)*

Debolina prays to the goddess in different ways. When asked about her daily rituals, she mentioned chanting a Buddhist mantra. She doesn't follow any other rituals. She deeply admires Saraswati for her knowledge and willingly participates in the annual puja, mainly helping with tasks like preparing fruits and *bhog* (offering) for the goddess. She does not perform any rituals daily. For her, when she thinks of Saraswati or Tara, another form of Kali, she prays by chanting a Buddhist mantra. She has created her own way to worship and remember the goddess.

Other women like Pari and Mou perform certain rituals that are part of the established worship tradition of the goddess, but they do not necessarily perceive those rituals as formal customs. For instance, Pari discussed one of the customs of offering a lotus to the goddess Rajrajeswari, explaining that it did not seem like a formal ritual. She specifically mentioned that the religious ritual is not a ritual for her. It is "a way of my life," which is how she connects with her ancestral goddesses. Instead, there was a sense of joy and connection to the ancestral deity during the practice. She mentioned,

> *So as a, as a childhood practice, we have 108 Lotus and you, you bloom. You let the lotus bloom. So that's, that's the practice that I do. So, it's mostly decorating. decorating the goddess. So as a child, my mother would always ask me to bring one flower back home and to keep it with myself. I didn't do that as a practice. It's it's a religious practice, but I do it as a way of my life. It's not out of that. (Pari Ghosh, July 16, 2024)*

Similarly, the only ritual Mou observes is Ashtami anjali every year during Durga Puja. Mou explained the concept of Ashtami anjali is about the goddess's power. According to Mou, offering prayers on that particular day to the goddess Durga has connotations related to power, control, and agency, as it is the day when Durga kills the demon and takes complete control over the universe. To her, this is

less about a ritual and more about absorbing the power of the goddesses and recognizing Durga's dominance and supremacy. Mou commented,

> *Not anything in particular, but of course, in Durga Puja, I think, you know, the Ashtami Anjali becomes a mandatory thing. And I have often wondered that it is not only just right, about, going and performing the Anjali, but, you know, if I'm just to take the very popular narrative, I'm using the word popular narrative because, you know, the other formats of interpretation of the worship of Durga has multiple. If I'm taking the popular narrative where Ashtami happens to be the crescendo, you know, the day when, you know, ultimately, she has a complete thing. So, I think celebrating that for me, you know, celebrating that crescendo, where ultimately that, you know, I'm celebrating the woman getting complete control over, you know, the dynamics of destruction, evil, etc., and in complete control. So that is something that I, I think, you know, as this interpretation of the Anjali has changed for me over the years. When I was a young girl, of course, it was something that I was told, and that is what I did. And of course, you know, with age and etc. so I began to wonder why just Ashtami, why couldn't be a Saptami, could be, why wouldn't it be a Nabami or whatever, you know, then, to these things, you know, so, so this is something that I think most of us, you know, just like me, most Bengalis continue to do Ashtami Anjali. So somewhere, even if it is, we are not really aware of what we are doing. But by doing that on that particular day, I think you are celebrating that crescendo, you know, and you're ultimately celebrating that woman, ability to control and have everything in control. So, that is beautiful in this sense. (Mou Mitra, December 10, 2023)*

All these practices the women performed, informal, lived religious and embodied experiences, are crucial to understanding resistance and subversion of Brahmanical patriarchy and orthodox Hindu religious traditions. When women express their feelings of goddesses and their lived experiences through their bodies, they break the orthodox Brahmanical Hindu tradition and patriarchal system that governs women's bodies and their freedom to express devotion. Women engaging in meditation, conversation, dancing, and singing are not only redefining worship but also narrating the multiple ways goddesses are perceived and present in the everyday lives of women outside the Hindutva Brahmanical patriarchal framework.

Women emphasized reflecting on how to connect with goddesses and find individual paths to interact with goddesses. Women created their own rituals and ways to communicate with the divine feminine, such as through sadhana or meditation. This also points to what Revathi Krishnaswamy calls

"subversive spirituality" (1993, p. 139) when discussing the *Bhakti* movement in India and the role of women *bhakti* (devotion) saints, who, through their devotionalism, challenged patriarchal rituals and ideologies (Krishnaswamy, 1993). Krishnaswamy notes that the *Bhakti*, or devotional, movement in the 7th or 8th century saw the emergence of women religious figures, such as Lal Ded, Mahadeviyakka, and Mirabai. *Bhakti* transformed the religious landscape in India, resisting Brahmanical Hinduism and the caste system in Indian society (Krishnaswamy, 1993, pp. 139-140). These women bhakti saints acted against the traditional gender model of worship, crafting their own ways to worship gods and goddesses. The "subversive spirituality" (Krishnaswamy, 1993, p. 139) applies to women like Ishita, Kabita, and Shuchitra, who define their own ways to connect with the goddess through dance, reading of *Devi Mahatmya*, or sadhana outside the Brahmanical ways of worship.

Susan Wadley notes that Indian society and religious culture rely on a hierarchical caste system, where male Brahmins have access to Vedic knowledge, while Shudras, the untouchables, and women are restricted from hearing the Vedas and holding "religious power" (Wadley, 1977, p. 121). Texts such as the Manu Smriti focus on women's roles in *stridharma* (the wife's duty), which is considered the primary purpose of a woman's life (Bevilacqua, 2017, p. 54). The women I interviewed showed their resistance against Brahmanical patriarchal notions by not following the traditional rituals and gender norms prescribed by Brahmanical patriarchy. They forged their own path to reach the goddess. It reflects a subversive act where they assert their choice and power by creating a narrative of devotionalism separate from the Brahminical concept of worship, which is rooted in caste, gender, and class distinctions. Their ways of understanding and remembering goddesses represent subversion and resistance to orthodox, gendered religious norms.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I described how goddesses are present in the everyday lives of ordinary Hindu women in West Bengal. The narratives showed that the divine feminine is not a distant deity but an intimate figure who is sometimes a mother, a daughter, a friend, a strength, or a guiding presence. The goddesses are treated with the same love and equality as any other family member in a Bengali household. They are part of women's daily existence, as evident from the stories and family traditions women shared during interviews. While stories are an essential component of goddess introduction, women expressed that festivals, cultural practices, and temples all play a role in socializing women with goddesses. The accounts also showed how both mainstream and local goddess figures, like Manasa and Rajrajeswari, play important roles in women's daily lives, offering a glimpse of the plural and diverse understandings that contrast with the patriarchal, uniform Hindutva narratives of goddesses.

Women redefined their idea of worship through which they resisted the patriarchal, orthodox religious rituals that control women's expressions. Through their diverse ways of engaging with the goddess, women presented a unique narrative rooted in their lived experiences and personal interpretations. Their methods of communicating with the goddess question the hierarchical relationship between the devotee and the divine. For them, the goddess is someone they can talk to, rely on, and treat as they wish without feeling compelled to follow specific footsteps or rituals. The narratives highlight the importance of choice and exercising that choice in remembering and worshiping the goddess. This is significant in a context where Hindutva organizations, through their cooptation of goddess narratives, impose models of Hindu womanhood and religious icons on women both within and outside the Hindutva framework. Moreover, Hindutva politics control who and how to worship Hindu deities, what to eat, and other purity and impurity rules associated with ritual practices, reinforcing a Brahmanical patriarchal system. In this context, when ordinary women express

their opinions about who and how they worship, which rituals to observe, and what to discard, it subtly but powerfully challenges the Hindutva way of worship. This chapter lays the groundwork for Chapter 6, where I focus explicitly on women's resistance to Hindutva narratives of goddesses and Hindu womanhood through their interpretation of goddesses, highlighting the empowering, plural, and regional imagery of the divine feminine.

CHAPTER SIX: NOT ONE BUT MANY: REIMAGINING GODDESSES BEYOND HINDUTVA

INTRODUCTION

> *আমার মনে হয় ব্যক্তিগত জীবন আর বাইরের জগতের মধ্যে একটা আড়াল থাকা উচিত। ধর্ম বা দেবী পূজা ভীষণভাবেই একটা ব্যক্তিগত ব্যাপার বলে মনে হয়। সেটাকে রাজনীতির মতো একটা পাবলিক ক্ষেত্রে নিয়ে যাওয়াটা আমার ভালো লাগে না*[185]*।*
> *(Kumari Dey, December 27, 2023)*[186]
>
> *I would imagine that there is no singular, homogeneous ideal goddess. I feel that is detrimental to the plurality of our nation-state. And there should not be one singular imagination because that it is, that is not there in the first place. (Madhabi Mondal, December 22, 2023)*

Kumari Dey argued that for her, religion or anything related to goddess worship is an intimate and personal aspect of life that should not mix with politics. Madhabi Mondol, who is an advocate against caste politics, explicitly stated that she rejects any idea of a singular, monolithic goddess narrative that Hindutva promotes. Her idea of plurality in goddess imagery is directly linked to a plural idea of India as a nation-state that has diverse cultures, languages, religions, and worship traditions. While pointing out the problematic aspect of intertwining religion with politics, their comments highlight that matters of worship are private, and a single idea of Hindu, Hindu identity, and the Hindu goddess is opposed to the secular nature of the Indian nation-state. This chapter shifts from the everyday lived experiences of goddesses, discussed in Chapter 5, to the multiple perceptions of goddesses embedded in women's oral accounts, showing how this subverts and challenges Brahminical patriarchal and Hindutva narratives of goddesses.

[185] I believe there should be a distinction between personal life and the outside world. Religion or goddess worship is a very personal matter to me. I do not like it being brought into the public sphere, such as politics.

[186] All the names of the participants have been anonymized and replaced with pseudonyms. The location name has also been changed to preserve anonymity.

While the previous chapter explored how goddesses are integrated into the daily lives of ordinary Hindu women and the ritualistic aspect of the goddess worship culture, this chapter centers on the perceptions and voices of ordinary Hindu women, whose narratives and lived experiences are often marginalized in the mainstream portrayal of goddesses by Hindutva organizations and politicians. By focusing on the experiences and perceptions of ordinary women from Bengal, the chapter reveals a regional, plural, inclusive, and imaginative representation of the divine feminine that directly opposes Hindutva's singular, homogeneous, casteist, and exclusionary narrative of goddesses. In doing so, the chapter shows how the multiple imagery of goddesses, both regional, local, and personal, offers an alternative model for living outside the dominant narrative of monoculture and exclusion promoted by Hindutva politics.

The narratives of the participants in this study highlight the complexity of the imagination of a goddess, who is not merely a figure of martial prowess or compliance, as portrayed in the Hindutva narrative. The goddess is a friend, a rebel, unruly, ever-changing, inclusive, and a deeply political figure for women, from whom they learn to question, dissent, negotiate, and subvert Brahmanical patriarchal standards. The multiple forms of goddesses in women's narratives exposed the caste, class, gender, and region-based exclusionary nature of Hindutva's North Indian upper-caste narrative of the goddess.

Women not only spoke about their understanding of goddesses but also spoke against Brahmanical patriarchy, monolithic Hindu identity, the weaponization of religion by Hindutva politicians, and the deeply fragmented Indian society based on communal lines. The resistance present in their narratives was not loud. It was evident in silence, in laughter, in pauses during the interview, and in their refusal to conform to Hindutva's idea of goddesses. Women rejected the parochial and linear Hindutva narrative on goddesses by reclaiming the goddess as contradictory, fluid, intimate, and plural figures.

Another aspect that emerged from the oral narratives of women is their rejection of the concept of ideal Hindu womanhood. In the interviews, women declined the notions of submission, obedience, purity, chastity, and nationalist duty attached to the model of the ideal Hindu woman. Some of the women had their own conception of womanhood based on their real-life inspiring figures, both mythological or historical figures, like Draupadi[187], Razia Sultana[188], and Gulbadan Begum[189]. When women spoke against the Brahminical patriarchal models of Hindu womanhood, they challenged caste hierarchy and gender subordination.

Women's oral accounts of goddesses turn storytelling into a political and subversive act, serving as a tool to express voices that have long been suppressed in mainstream politics. The narratives bear witness to a living and revolutionary presence of goddesses who do not conform to the traditional model of Hindu womanhood. Instead, these goddesses are multifaceted, have control over their sexuality, and serve as empowering examples for women. This approach aligns with the multiplicity of imagery of the goddess and the Matrikas found in the text, *Devi Mahatmya*, as discussed in Chapter 4 of the thesis.

This chapter has five thematic sections. The first section discusses the ambiguity in goddess imagery, exploring how women imagine goddesses in diverse and complex ways. Section two explores

[187] Draupadi is a central character in the Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*. She is the wife of the five Pandavas. See See Hazri, K. (2024). Draupadi and the paradigm of woman empowerment in Hinduism. *Critical Research on Religion*, *12*(1), 79-92. https://doi-org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/10.1177/20503032241226975 for more information.

[188] Razia Sultana is a female ruler, known for daring personality. See Mukhopadhyay, U. (2014). Imagining the powerful 'other': Representations of Razia Sultan. In D. Dimitrova (Ed.), *The other in South Asian religion, literature and film: Perspectives on Otherism and Otherness* (1st ed., pp. 103–118). Routledge. https://doi-org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/10.4324/9781315858647 for more information.

[189] Gulbadan Begum was a Mughal princess and belonged to the "Timurid heritage" and wrote *Humayunnamah* (Leong, 2024, p. 688). See, Leong, A. C. (2024). 'If Only That Pitiless Blade Had Pierced My Own Heart and Eyes': Mughal Royal Women's Grief as a Form of Political Rhetoric. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, *47*(4), 688–703. https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2024.2366633 for more information.

the empowering aspect in the understanding of goddesses and how women draw a sense of power from the imagery. Section three explores women's response to Hindu womanhood and the aspects of caste, class, and ethnicity in Hindutva nationalists' portrayal of goddesses. The fourth section covers women's critiques of the equation of women with goddesses, a standard narrative predominant in Hindutva politics' idolization of women's roles in right-wing women's organizations. The final section highlights the inclusive and regional understanding of goddesses that speaks of plurality in goddess tradition and directly challenges Hindutva's homogenizing lens of the Hindu goddess. My discussion begins with the ambiguous goddess imagery, which highlights the conflicting and paradoxical imagery of goddesses. This sets the stage for the empowering, regional, and critical take on goddess imagery that exists beyond the Hindutva framework.

1 AMBIGUITY IN GODDESS IMAGERY

> *I think our gods, in Hindu religion, our gods come with a lot of flaws, I think, and that is a very fascinating turn to me. (Madhabi Mondol, December 22, 2023)*

The goddesses present in the memories and experiences of the women I interviewed are unlike the imagery encountered in 19th-century nationalist iconography or Hindutva propaganda. They are flawed, ambiguous, mysterious, and plural. They are neither the dutiful, submissive wife, mother, daughter, nor the warrior. They are both, and they can also be none. Goddesses are what women need them to be. In these narratives, goddesses are deeply personal, plural, political, and much more complex. These goddesses in women's narratives are angry, non-conformist, unruly, empowering, destructive, protective, and forgiving.

In the narratives, the divine feminine is portrayed as more humanized yet equally regarded as an elusive, unfathomable power. Women speak about multiple images, including those forms that are not part of the Hindutva discourse. The imagery of goddesses in women's oral accounts reflects similar ambiguity found in the text, *Devi Mahatmya*, where the goddess embodies both rage and calmness. She is no longer just a daughter or a mother of a nation or a consort goddess. To women, she is their

companion, a source of inner strength and power, a form of resistance, and a force of chaos that refuses to be tamed by patriarchal standards of gender norms.

This section examines how these goddesses are perceived by ordinary Hindu women outside the stereotypical, rigid, and idealized imagery imposed by Hindutva ideology. The Hindu nationalist discourse has stripped Durga and Kali of their ambiguities and resisting attitudes. Instead, it reimagines them as dutiful consort goddesses and violent protectors of the Hindu nation. However, in the narratives of the women I interviewed, figures like Durga and Kali appear in diverse forms and images. They emerge as transgressive figures, reflecting the realities of Hindu women's lives and their everyday negotiations with patriarchal norms. Goddesses emerge as imagined spaces (Ganguly, 2024, para 9), inclusive and fiery figures shaped by women based on their choices and their personal connection to the divine feminine.

Adrita viewed Durga as the woman worshipped on her right. She is the main deity, and anyone around the goddess is secondary. While Durga is nurturing, she is fierce, and that aspect of her fierceness is always present. Adrita commented,

> *Like I mentioned before, the Durga maa is like this. So, one woman show, she is like idea of family নিয়ে আসছে হাঁটি করে বা নৌকো করে*[190]*, and when she, she's like the boss of the family, she comes and there is a tiny Shiv এর ছবি পাশে*[191]*. I like the kind of power she brings in. You know, this idea of female that she is soft also. So, but when necessary, she will not still think twice before standing up against something wrong. (Adrita Chowdhury, May 22, 2024)*

She referred to the varied imagination of Durga that she saw in the pandals (temporary structures built during the Durga festival) in West Bengal. In one of them, Adrita mentioned that goddess Durga was seen having a conversation with Mahisasur, the demon, before the final battle. Durga removes the mask from the demon's face, exposing the softer side of Mahisasur, who is crying in front of the

[190] Durga is coming on her own, either on an elephant or a boat.

[191] Tiny picture of Siva next to her.

goddess. This representation moved her as it speaks about the forgiving and nurturing side of the goddess. The goddess in the battle is a warrior, but she is not devoid of emotions. It highlights the duality in her warrior portrayal. Adrita liked that duality. She said,

> *So I genuinely believe that she's like the perfect combination of gentle yet fierce, and these are the things I really look forward to the idea of kindness. And also, you know, when there is something wrong, these are ideas only that fed to us. Asur is that evil. Durga maa is the family lady. সবাইকে protect করছে[192]. (Adrita Chowdhury, May 22, 2024)*

Adrita did not see Mahisasur as solely an evil figure and Durga as a good mother and wife. She interpreted Durga as someone capable of looking beyond Mahisasur's dark exterior and finding forgiveness. She perceived both Kali and Durga as influential figures who are independent goddesses, and she could relate to them. She commented,

> *I kind of resonate with the idea of Durga and Kali Maa in a way. I think Kali Maa is really cool. These are the one that I resonate with the most because they seem very independent, of course. (Adrita Chowdhury, May 22, 2024)*

Her admiration for the goddess figures is rooted in the challenges she faces as a woman living and working alone in India's major cities. She deeply admires the independence and courage she gains from Kali's imagery. She commented,

> *And Maa Kali, I mean, I think like, she's, that's what, she's like this cool goddess. She's is this তাণ্ডব নাচ[193] and going all over নিজের মতো রাত্রিবেলা[194], and doesn't need anybody. And you know that idea is also quite attractive to me. And and every time we think of Kali we think of, you know night. And Kali pujo is at night and that রাত্রিবেলা ডাকিনী যোগিনী বেরোবে[195]. These ideas, I am very, I'm very fond of because we're not, we can't walk the night without calling our father and asking him to pick me up ever. And the fact that মাথা কেটে হাতে নিয়ে যাচ্ছে[196] that I love, I love the gore personally, and I genuinely want to do that to people when they coming in my way. I like courage*

[192] Protecting all of them.

[193] Dance of destruction.

[194] Freely moving at night.

[195] Kali is going out with her friends, Dakini and Jogini, at night.

[196] Carrying severed heads (of demons) in her hand.

> *in a certain way and how she resonates nisha, meaning night, throughout whatever she is. And yeah, scantily clothed মানে, সে ঐ quintessential সুন্দর শাড়ি পরে দাঁড়িয়ে থাকার মতো নয়*[197]*. (Adrita Chowdhury, May 22, 2024)*

Kali breaks and challenges the norms in every step of her existence as a goddess and as a woman. Kali is not a typical domestic figure, and Adrita is drawn to the kind of dominance and control Kali has over night. Here, she glorifies the gore aspect of Kali's image, one that she wants to follow and emulate when dealing with obstacles and unwanted men in her life. She craves that power and the ability to destroy any barrier that comes her way, just like Kali does. Night as a space is seen as vulnerable to women. Patriarchy controls women's movement at night. Phil Hubbard and Rachela Colosi argue that feminists have long challenged the "patriarchal attitudes" that establish night as a men-dominated space (Hubbard & Colosi, 2013, p. 593). When Kali rules the night as her domain, it challenges the patriarchal understanding, undermining the male domination of the night. According to Adrita, Kali's presence challenges the notions of night as a fearful space for women. Kali puja happens at night, and Kali roams around at night with her demon friends. Kali's presence at night is a resistance and defiance of gendered norms. Kali's personality gives Adrita a great sense of pride. Adrita draws power from the kindness of Durga and the fierceness of Kali. Her account conveys what it truly means to emulate a goddess as women appropriate the qualities of the divine feminine to resist and subvert structural barriers that come their way.

For Apu, goddesses are protectors and mother figures in whom she can confide, seek help from, and connect with. She said,

> *Whenever I think of what Goddess is on, I pray. It is a mother character. Completely because whenever I hold my hands and go in front of God, the first thing that comes out from my mouth is Maa. So, I look at her as a mother. So completely see her as a mother who will protect and listen and take care (Apu Bose, June 24, 2024)*

[197] She is not someone wearing a beautiful saree.

She highlighted the supreme energy, or shakti, that she believes the goddesses possess. For her, the goddesses, especially Durga and Kali, are the protectors and someone she can confide in with both her fears and her happiness. They maintain the balance in the universe. She said,

> *I completely believe that there is immense power in this universe that is there for which the universe and the entire, like everything is moving around. There is a power [goddess] there is this energy that is balancing everything. That is what I believe in. And if you tell me that what which goddess I believe in, then I would say that Maa Durga and Kali. They are the two goddesses whom I have immense believe in whenever I am in trouble, I go. If there is any happy incident happening or anything happening, for that reason. (Apu Bose, June 24, 2024)*

When discussing the goddess's power, Apu referenced the story of Durga defeating Mahisasur and how it conveys Durga's dominance over all obstacles. She discussed the real-life patriarchal challenges women encounter in both public and private spheres. Apu believes that the stories surrounding the goddesses could help change the patriarchal mindset, as they show feminine power overcoming evil and ultimately restoring balance. Apu stated,

> *I think the stories itself gives an extreme এই যে মা দুর্গা যে story এই যে মহালয়ার দিন*[198] */ The story that we see, that it shows that how much feminine power it has got. I think and I feel that tradition should go on, at least now when we see this , we still see patriarchy , we still see, still see in so many families, you know, only both are working but the female will come, the women will be cooking and it's there and in the 80% of the families I can see it with my friends also when they are staying with in-laws, not only with the in-laws but with husband also. Okay. Cooking and housework things are to be done by woman. I do not know when this will change. But the feminine, the power, I think the stories that are being shown to us or maa Kali or maa Durga, I would say they are very influential. I use that has influenced me and that has I, I believe, changed a lot of people's mind that এই যে negativity বা এই যে evil যে ব্যাপারটা, সেটাকে একটা মহিলাই ধ্বংস করেছে*[199] *ultimately. (Apu Bose, June 24, 2024)*

Unlike the popular figures of Kali and Durga, Saraswati is not widely recognized in the Hindu nationalist discourse. Although the Ashtabhuja imagery in Hindutva discourse has elements of Saraswati's qualities, Saraswati is not a mainstream figure in Hindutva politics. She symbolizes

[198] The story of Maa Durga during *Mahalaya*.

[199] She is destroying the evil ultimately.

unending knowledge and the power of wisdom, which is why many women participants appreciate her. However, she is not a typical warrior or mother goddess. Saraswati is not known for her beauty, but rather valued for her profound knowledge, with little importance given to her looks. When describing Saraswati, Debolina pointed to the many ways she perceives Saraswati. She is the goddess of knowledge, but also the goddess of wisdom. She personifies anything creative. However, she is also what Debolina calls "life force" (Debolina Maitra, February 22, 2024), one who symbolizes birth and reason, which Debolina defined as enlightenment. She said,

> *Initially in my childhood days, I can remember I used to like her simplicity. And, you know, she used to wear always the white sari and all. And also because of her dignity and all, she was very dignified even with, you know, only with the, you know, book or something like that. She was very dignified. I used to like her very much. And with her white dress and less ornaments, she was so dignified. I used to like her for that initially. But later on, I mean, with the age, I think I like her because of her wisdom. I like Saraswati because for her wisdom and as you can know, Saraswati is one of the few goddesses we can see that which has been accepted, which has been observed also in Buddhism and also in Jainism because of wisdom. So there is a Jaina Saraswati and Buddhist Saraswati. Sometimes, she is called Pragya Paromita. But all of them, in all of this, she is the deity of wisdom, learning, singing, and all those things, that creative thing, and that knowledge thing. And also, I like to Saraswati, you know, since I am into this kind of studies, I also learned it all over times that Saraswati is the consort of Brahma, on one hand, and Saraswati is also the consort of Vishnu, on the other hand. So, Saraswati sometimes is also the symbol of, you know, the life force. So metaphorically, progenitor sometimes we call the Lakshmi also a progenitor. But I mean, she's the goddess of birth. But I think here we can take it metaphorically. The term birth. Your birth means our enlightenment. (Debolina Maitra, February 22, 2024)*

Kabita's account highlighted the ambiguity in goddess representations. Addressing the shifting nature of goddesses' perceptions based on women's choice, Kabita said,

> *When I was, you, being the goddess in a particular auspicious occasion, she is my, like my mother. So, I am her daughter. So, it is my choice in whatever way I really call her. (Kabita Duttagupta, June 22, 2024)*

She further added,

> *And she's like, sometimes she is like my own mother. She, sometimes, she's like my friend. And she could be my best companion, and she could be my good guide, supervisor. So, these things, these words are very common when we talk about goddesses as a source of inspiration in our life. (Kabita Duttagupta, June 22, 2024)*

There is no fixed perception of the goddess, and it changes depending on how Kabita remembers the divine feminine in different contexts or how she chooses to define her. As a protector, her role is not always so fixed. She argued,

> *But at the same time, it is not like that that when we ask for some help or we seek the very, you know, assurance from the goddesses, my God, mother, help me. It's not like that she's very much ready to help us. We need to, you know, you need to ask for her help or protection, the blessings. If you are very much, you know worthy of it, you have to be capable or you have to be worthy enough, to get the blessings of the goddesses. So that is how I think that there is a check and balance factor. She is there, but at the same time, she is not there. She is very much near and dear to us. But at the same time, she's very much, she's staying in an isolated place. She's not so much close. So this check and balance matter is always going on. And she's there. She's here. She's everywhere. But at the same time, she is nowhere. So that is how I can explain my perception of goddesses in my regular lives. (Kabita Duttagupta, June 22, 2024)*

Through Kabita's story, we see the complexity of how women perceive the divine feminine in their daily lives. The goddess can be an intimate figure, like a mother or friend, but she is also a powerful figure. She is not an ordinary woman. Her presence is visible to those who are worthy, but not always accessible. She often lives in isolation, being both all-knowing and yet not fully present everywhere. She has her own realm, where she resides. The goddess is full of contradictions, and Kabita highlights this aspect through her account of the divine.

Mou Mitra perceived Durga as a figure who is constantly evolving and can be described in multiple ways. She commented,

> *I would, I think I completely identify with that figure of Durga. I see her as an embodiment of a lot of things, you know, of knowledge, of power, of wealth, of, you know, a lot of things, you know, and, and, you know, I see her as somebody who can perform a lot of things. (Mou Mitra, December 10, 2023)*

Like Mou, Shonali also perceived goddesses in different ways, reflecting on her real-life experience as a woman. She understood the goddess, Kali, as a sister, a strong presence in her life, a guide, and a source of inspiration. Shonali's view of Kali is that of immanent power that helps her navigate the complex terrain of society and societal expectations. Kali helps her in facing everyday

challenges and guides her in resisting, negotiating, and persisting in a patriarchal society that expects a lot from women. Describing her adoration for Kali, she said,

> *And when I grew up, when I started realizing my potential as an individual, as a woman, of course, there were certain difficulties in life. So, whenever I encountered any problem, of course, Goddess Kali was the go-to person. So, I would say that. (Shonali Roy, February 15, 2024)*

Subha, a professor and social activist, viewed Kali as a source of power. During the interview, she talked about her life struggles, from her husband's declining health to other challenges, and how she always turned to Kali for strength. She never asks Kali to solve her problems. She seeks Kali's power so she can face challenges on her own. She said,

> *ধরো, আমি খুব disturbed হয়ে যাই। তখন ওখান থেকে একটা force, power, ধরো আমি ঠাকুরকে ডাক দিলাম যে এটা আমি কী করে করব, আমি কখনও বলি না এটার থেকে আমাকে উদ্ধার করো। আমি জিজ্ঞেস করি যে এটা কী করে আমি মোকাবিলা করব। একটা সময়ে সেই রাস্তা তো আমি পাই। Block তো কখনও হয়ে যায় না। তখন মনে হয় এই রাস্তাটা যে পেলাম, এই যে খুঁজি, এই জন্য যে tenacity লাগে, mental strength লাগে, এটাই হচ্ছে উনি*[200]*. (Subha Chatterjee, December 29, 2023)*

She expressed that Kali represents her mental strength, her ability to fight, and a space where she finds comfort. There is liberty in how Subha wants to visualise Kali. Sometimes as her daughter, as her power, or as her mother, or as a divine entity. There is no fixed imagination here. For Subha, if anything is fixed, it is her deep adoration for Kali. Subha said,

> *আমার কালীকে দেখা, বা তাঁকে feel করা, বা তাঁকে নিজের মধ্যে নেওয়াটা একদম different way। একদম different way. আমি আমার মতোন করে তাঁকে দেখি, আমি আমার মতোন করে তাঁকে ভাবি, আমি আমার মতোন করে তাঁকে feel করি। যখন কোনো একটা ভালো কাজ হয়, তখন আমি ভাবলাম*[201]*. (Subha Chatterjee, December 29, 2023)*

[200] Suppose I get very disturbed. At that moment, I feel a force or a power. I call upon the goddess, asking 'How do I deal with this?' I never say 'Please rescue me from this.' Instead, I ask, 'How do I confront this?' Ultimately, I do find that path. It never gets completely blocked. Then it feels like the path that I found, the seeking itself, the tenacity and mental strength required for it, this is the goddess.

[201] My feeling, interaction, and perception of Kali are different. I see her the way I want to. I think of her the way I want to. I feel her, the way I want to. I think of her when something good happens.

Kali is what Subha describes as ‘oboyob’, a vessel that carries shakti or power. When she worships Kali, she absorbs that shakti inside her. Subha noted that she does not feel like shakti is a separate entity. To her, Kali is shakti, and shakti is an integral part of Kali’s existence. She thinks of shakti as a presence in her daily life, recalling the goddess, Kali. She said,

> *তো চোখ বুজলেই একটা power বা ঠাকুর মানে কালী আমার কাছে। কারণ আমরা তো গৃহী, আমরা তো সেই সাধনা করি না, ফলে ওই অবয়ব একটা লাগে যেখান থেকে আমি শক্তিটা গেইন করব। কালী আমার কাছে সেই অবয়ব যেখান থেকে আমি শক্তিটাকে gain করব*[202]*. (Subha Chatterjee, December 29, 2023)*

Pari drew inspiration from two figures: one is Rajrajeswari, and the other is a blend of Durga and Kali. She perceives Rajrajeswari as a symbol of peace and shares a close friendship with her. She said,

> *So she is mostly like a playmate, will just be there to enjoy. I love just the aura she brings in. She creates so, that that I never give much thought on that. But I cannot think that one day we might not have Rajeshwari in my home. Right? (Pari Ghosh, July 16, 2024)*

Regarding the combination of Kali and Durga, which is specific to Pari’s view of the divine feminine, she said,

> *And number two is a blend of Maa Durga and Kali. And and, same thing, right? I also see Durga as the daughter. And now that I'm also married, I kind of really feel that when she comes in a Bengali household, the way she comes with that, with that nurture, that care, like we, when we go back our home, we care for our parents, we care for the people that we had. It's the same thing that she does, and the way our parents are looking up to us, like, when are our children going to come? I think it is same for us and for her. Right. And we wear very good clothes. Our parents ensure that we are having the best food. I think that's exactly the same. So, I see her as an extension of my own life and my own being. (Pari Ghosh, July 16, 2024)*

Pari connects to the figure of Durga through her own identity as a daughter and as a married woman living in her husband’s house after marriage. When Pari visits her parents, she brings joy, warmth, and celebration to the family, much like Durga as a daughter who brings love and affection during Durga

[202] When I think of God, I think of Kali. Kali is that vessel from whom I draw energy. I am a family person, not an ascetic. I need a vessel or a figure from whom I can draw energy or power. Kali is that figure.

Puja. Kali, on the other hand, is Pari's source of power and the one from whom she learns to resist barriers. During the interview, Pari shared the criticisms she faced for being dark-skinned. She resonated with Kali because Kali is also a dark-skinned goddess and is celebrated as the dark one. She remarked,

> *With Kali, I think I can resonate with her a lot more of like pushing that barrier of being dark. You can't wear white clothes. You will look darker or you can't wear black clothes. Surprisingly, I'm wearing black today. You you can't do certain things. You will look horrible. So, when I look at Kali, she just doesn't care. Yeah. So, I think I get a lot of courage to heart because. Yeah. (Pari Ghosh, July 16, 2024)*

For Pari, Kali is also a friend like Rajrajeswari. Although everyone finds Kali intimidating, Pari believes Kali can be someone's most faithful friend who is honest, blunt, and constantly breaking boundaries and stigmas with her confidence. She is an unapologetic goddess who is fearless and sometimes ruthless. Kali is not ashamed of her skin color and wears whatever she wants. When people criticize Pari for being a dark-complexioned woman and tell her not to wear black or dark coloured clothes, she takes a cue from Kali and does not worry about traditional beauty standards. Pari saw Kali's nude imagery as a symbol of someone who lives openly without hiding her true self. That is something that can be emulated in real life. Pointing to Kali's non-conformist and unabashed attitude, Pari commented,

> *She does, she does not listen. And and people generally worship Kali. It's because out of fear that what if I don't? She will, she will kill me. But seeing from the perspective of Kali being God, being your friend, it's actually very easy because you can easily reach out to your friend who is just an unabashed and honest and come off with that nudity. And by nudity, I don't mean that not wearing clothes, but that that, that openness. She's also symbolizing that openness that you, you know, that honesty which is totally uncovered. (Pari Ghosh, July 16, 2024)*

To Pari, most divine feminine figures are like friends she chats with casually. She is not afraid to ask questions or doubt them because she believes the divine feminine will not mind answering, and

goddesses will not mind if she eats meat during her worship because she sees them as friends. Pari stated,

> *But the other half of me is like asking this question that what if I eat a bit of biriyani? Would she? She will. She will allow me. But society, the entire brigade of family, would they? (Pari Ghosh, July 16, 2024)*

The society compels Pari to follow the rules of worship, but the goddess does not. Her perception of the divine feminine as a friend not only conveys an understanding of the goddess as an intimate part of her reality, but it also subverts traditional notions attached to beauty, rituals, and food around goddess worship culture. Pari's said,

> *So yeah. Yeah, I'm friends with the Calcutta God [referring to Durga, Kali]. I'm not a trendsetter. I want to be her friend. And I'm breaking a lot of barriers to be her friend. (Pari Ghosh, July 16, 2024)*

Pari admires the figures of Durga, Kali, and Rajraeswari, and also sees herself in them, as she said.

> *I like the way I talked about Rajeshwari. Kali. Durga. I think, I think I am an amalgamation of all these together. And I have my own traits and my own characteristics. (Pari Ghosh, July 16, 2024)*

Ishita recognizes the divine feminine as shakti or Sakta (power) or as Kali. She does not see Kali as a distant, separate figure disconnected from her daily life. Kali is present in her steps and every action, and she cannot imagine living without Kali's presence. She stated,

> *I was like, how do I even answer this? Like I have? I don't know where to begin, how to end it. Because like I said, right at the beginning, my life like I owe it to her and she's not that intangible concept somewhere, someone out there whom, like, you know, I have to worship or who is untouchable for me, she is not that. I mean, if I am cooking also and if I'm doing something very mundane also, my relationship with her at all points, you know, in every moment that's who she is for me. I don't think I can exist one moment without her. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

She finds strength when she reads the *Devi Mahatmya* and the *Kalika Purana*. It is her way of connecting and talking with the divine feminine. Ishita's different emotions are linked to various forms of the goddess, and in every feeling or emotion, she senses the presence of the divine feminine. She perceived both Durga and Kali as different forms of the divine feminine. However, even though both

Durga and Kali have distinct energies associated with their personalities, Ishita feels that it is ultimately about the power that these goddesses possess. She explained how she feels safe in the presence of the goddess. She stated,

> *So, for me Durga and Kali are different, and of course they are different forms. They have their different attributes. You know, they, they represent different energies, you know, on a cognitive level. But in my emotions, they are just that very profound, strong, intense, immersive presence যার কাছে[203] I say I can be safe. I can be vulnerable and I can be naked. That's, that's all that is for me. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

Referring to that aspect of safety and vulnerability, Ishita further explained,

> *You can't miss. It's an unmissable factor with the goddess is safety. How safe do you feel when you are navigating in the world, like from physical safety to emotional safety to psychological safety to just this knowing that I am safe and I can be a miserable child. I can be a wrong child, but whatever it is I belong to you, and you better take care of me so that fearlessness, that and that trust, দিনের শেষে যাই হোক না[204] I know, I mean, I belong to you, so I will. And I know that you will not allow. You will not let anything very wrong happen to me. So, you know that that sense of trust. And again, it's so organic. It's so organic. I don't know what to say. So yeah, it's I think this is also the longest that I've been speaking about her and not crying. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

For her, the goddess represents a safe, ambiguous, and mystical space. The goddess empowers Ishita, but at the same time, impairs her when Ishita is immersed in the goddess's thoughts. Emphasizing words like 'tasty', 'sensory', and 'delicious' (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024), Ishita said,

> *You know the, the world outside will say that you know, you become dysfunctional, but you know within yourself at what level you are experiencing and functioning, and it's a very tasty, delicious and sensory space. For me, it's very lucrative for me, আর একবার যদি ঢুকে যাই আমার মনে হয় আমি কোনো কাজ করতে পারবো না, কিচ্ছু পারবো না[205] / It's very empowering and debilitating for me at the same time. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

[203] With whom.

[204] Whatever the end is.

[205] If I get into it, I feel like I will not be able to do anything.

Ishita perceived the divine feminine as a powerful figure and mystical, fluid space where both perfection and flaws exist, emphasizing the ambiguity in the representations. She described the goddess by saying,

> *Very satiated, contented, well-rested woman who's in her power, living a very luscious life, making things happen just by a look of hers, immaculate at the same time flawed. Who has space for everything? Who exists? Who? That, that. That whole concept of omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience is her at the same time. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

For her, the goddess embodies the cosmos, the universe, creation, and destruction, much like the divine feminine imagination in the text *Devi Mahatmya*. Ishita said,

> *There is no room for any exclusion, any rejection. And there is room for everything that you know we are or we potentially could be. And of course, like you know, like I said, she is luscious. She is sensory, she's beautiful. She is, how do I even say and? See the fun is this is one space. This is one field. The more you delve deep, the more juicy and you swim. You swim. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

The narratives describe how goddesses are visualized in multiple ways in the lives of women. The goddesses are mothers, friends, daughters, protectors, and something more to ordinary women. For women, the goddess represents energy, strength, and power that help them overcome obstacles, discover themselves, and challenge barriers. The goddess is not someone to be worshipped only. Women connect with her because the goddess is also a woman who understands the challenges women face in their real lives. As a woman, the goddess offers a path for ordinary women to follow in overcoming life's obstacles. For women, the goddess is also a mystical, magical, and safe space who is sometimes an intimate figure, like a friend, and sometimes distant, like a deity. This ambiguity is an integral part of the divine feminine concept as perceived by women. The goddess's representation as someone who breaks boundaries, challenges norms, and rituals opens the door to a discussion in my next section about the empowering imagery of goddesses, present in the voices and lived experiences of women.

2 GODDESS AS EMPOWERING

Women I interviewed perceived goddesses as sources of power and strength. Interestingly, how women viewed goddesses as repositories of power is different from Hindutva's portrayal of goddesses' power. Hindutva encourages women to emulate the power of goddesses like Durga, Kali, and Ashtabhuja, but in ways that support the goals of Hindutva organizations. The emulation promoted by Hindutva nationalists is not to favour ideas of women's freedom, autonomy, or empowerment. Instead, the aim is to use the goddess's power and imagery to justify women's violent activism in Hindutva politics, without challenging traditional ideals of Hindu womanhood.

For ordinary women, power means being assertive, able to speak, and exercising choice and autonomy. Women draw power from the goddesses to question, challenge orthodox rituals and gender norms, and live on their own terms. When Adrita commented during the interview that she perceived Durga as someone "coming with a lot of power" (Adrita Chowdhury, May 22, 2024), she is not just symbolizing the goddess as powerful but also connecting to that power, where a woman alone can destroy male demons and control the universe. Similarly, Anisha associated power with the forms of Kali and Durga, both of which possess qualities of aggression and compassion. The common feature for Anisha is how the goddesses control chaos and maintain stability. She is the primary saviour, and other male gods are secondary. Apu mentioned during the interview, describing Durga and Kali,

> *Absolutely. They are empowering and আমার তো মনে হয়*[206] *these kinds of stories should be there all over the world to, I don't know. This is definitely Maa Durga and Kali. They are very influential. (Apu Bose, June 24, 2024)*

The women visualized the goddess as a supreme being. They learn from stories surrounding the goddess and draw strength to embody that power in their daily lives. For Ishita, Kali is an

[206] I think so.

empowering figure who motivates her to think critically and value herself. She learned from Kali how to set boundaries in personal spaces. She said,

> *In my relationship, in my relationships, Kali has been very empowering because I was a, when you don't know your boundaries, you mistake compassion for becoming a doormat. You don't have that strength, that power, but the capacity to step back and say no to witness something strongly and still not be beguiled by it. So, because obviously of my learning and studying psychology and everything সে আমাকে help করেছে*[207] *I think feeling, or at least requesting or praying for her presence in my life has given me that capacity, has incapacitated me to really build on that boundary. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

Ishita strongly believes that if the power of the goddesses influences every woman, society would improve. Emphasizing the empowering aspect of goddesses, she said,

> *If the goddess becomes, I think if if the goddess becomes a source of empowerment for every woman, and eventually every man also in a more social, relatable and lived context, then the world and the society would be a more habitable, better, easier and more powerful place to live in. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

Ishita highlighted the fear surrounding goddesses like Kali and the judgment that comes with being like Kali, which would mean taking a non-conformist path. Although Kali is a revered figure of shakti, no woman is expected to be a Kali, as that would mean having the power to challenge the concept of ideal Hindu womanhood. Ishita explained the concept of shakti, saying, "Shakti, like the word itself, says it is about empowerment. It is about embodying your power" (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024). She urged women to embrace that shakti which promotes freedom shamelessly and to free voices from all kinds of social pressure. She encouraged open acceptance of the shakti of the divine feminine without shame or secrecy. Ishita mentioned that acceptance of shakti does not involve ritual practices but instead reading and understanding that power through devotion or admiring the goddess's persona.

Madhuja, a corporate employee in Kolkata, finds both Durga and Kali empowering. According to her, Durga is a "dashabhuja" (goddess with ten hands) as portrayed in *Devi Mahatmya*, and she has many other interpretations of her character. Madhuja draws empowerment from both Durga and Kali

[207] She has helped me.

in her everyday life. Chanting the name of Durga and Kali empowers her and provides her with the power to overcome the hurdles in life. She pointed to Kali, saying,

> *I found, Kali, she is a kind of bit alien. She is not so much familiar or domesticated goddess is what we call, but she is a bit destructive and somehow, she is not so much friendly. But in spite of that, I found both of these goddesses are very much empowering when we look at them. (Madhuja Sen, June 23, 2024)*

Madhuja further commented,

> *I found this very much empowering from the part that somehow when I am trying to cope up with the very difficulties of my life, the struggles, I am facing in my everyday affairs, then I can chant the name of জয় মা কালী, জয় মা দুর্গা[208], so these words and mantras, I found it very, very empowering. I don't know why, because I cannot explain why I am doing so or why I'm saying so. It's very much spontaneous that somehow, I can chant, and I feel myself very much empowered. (Madhuja Sen, June 23, 2024)*

Madhu saw Durga as a figure who stood against the patriarchal idea of limiting women to traditional roles. The goddess's actions and power in the stories[209] served as a lesson on how she challenged and transgressed the normative gender norms. Madhu used that understanding to question society's structural problems and to apply that lesson to her daily life. She stated,

> *I think Durga Puja initially, I did not understand it. Like we celebrated this as a festival. But as I grew up, I think the narrative around this Durga puja, how we see the very figure of Durga as opposed to the very, you know, ideology of it that a woman can't do something or a woman will not be capable of doing something. So, this is the very structure where it all began. I think we, we, I personally began to question that, well this is the goddess that we worship. And this is because of the strength and courage that she went against the, traditional thinking, the traditional conception regarding who had, who is the most courageous species on this planet, right? So, this is something that is very thought-provoking for me initially. (Madhu Haldar, June 29, 2024)*

Madhu is captivated by Kali's rebellious attitude, and she said,

> *I was introduced to Goddess Kali, which is another, is nonconformist, a single as opposed to Goddess Durga. You see that goddess Kali, the configuration of the particular goddess is very, very nonconformity. You even see that bare body without any kind of attire. So that is as well a big thing for me. (Madhu Haldar, June 29, 2024)*

[208] Victory to Kali and victory to Durga is a common chant or prayer to the goddess.

[209] The stories mainly refer to the goddess's exploits that are present in *Devi Mahatmya*.

Madhu described Kali as a non-conformist figure. Unlike Durga, who comes during Durga Puja with children and her husband, Kali is a single, independent warrior goddess. Her unconventional nature and naked body are a rejection and transgression of the patriarchal notion of modesty that has been imposed on women. The power associated with Kali's naked figure is a challenge to patriarchal practices. Madhu said,

> *But when it comes to making a nonconformist God or a body that is very, that is, you know, that is at odds with the traditional conception of what Goddess is, you know, the perfect. When I, when I, when we say I think, from the very beginning I was taught to be রূপে লক্ষ্মী, গুণে সরস্বতী[210]. So, it's a kind of রূপে লক্ষ্মী [beauty like Lakshmi] is like, oh, I am expected to have that virtue of a woman, you know, the holistic thing that, you know, perfect from all the dimensions, and then you have গুণে সরস্বতী [intellectual like Saraswati], you study well, you have the intellectual property and all. So, it's a kind of it's a complete human being. But, when it comes to Goddess Kali, I think there are a lot of things to be discussed about. You talk about the body. You talk about a bare body without clothes. You talk about the persona, which is so outrageous, which is so threatening, and which is full of anger. Then you talk about the skin, which is not idealized. The skin, which is skin color, which is not celebrated. You know the name itself, Kali. And so, I think that figure is a resistance to all the kinds of idealization we make regarding goddesses. (Madhu Haldar, June 29, 2024)*

For Madhu, Kali's representation is not only about questioning the traditional roles women are expected to play in patriarchal society but also about challenging the conventional image of a goddess confined to traditional symbolism[211] to meet societal expectations. Kali shatters the conventional idea of goddesses based on her appearance, her anger, and her skin colour. Madhu highlights Kali's body and appearance in her response, illustrating how women interpret this aspect of Kali as a means to unlearn gendered notions of bodily integrity and chastity, and to establish their own personal connections with the goddess. Madhu's perspective on Kali led her to believe that a rebellious spirit should be revered. Madhu learned from the angry and aggressive nature of goddess Kali that such

[210] Intellectual like Saraswati and good-looking like Lakshmi.

[211] Traditional symbolism refers to the fair-skinned, upper-caste Brahmanical depiction of goddesses that visualize the goddess as domesticated, consort goddesses, and highlight their nurturing and motherly nature.

emotions are also part of goddess representations, breaking the patriarchal notion that goddesses are always motherly, nurturing, and docile figures. She said,

> *Goddess Kali is, it's a different persona for me. It's a different, altogether different character. And I think that also shows us that she's also to be worshiped. That anger is also to be worshiped. That's kind of non-conformity figure is what worthy of worshiping. And we do it regularly. So that is something I think, this diversity actually makes us think more about it. (Madhu Haldar, June 29, 2024)*

Madhu also learned from Kali the power to question, saying,

> *I think the power that I draw from Kamakhya or from Kali, I think the power of questioning. This is something that really, you know, gives me strength. (Madhu Haldar, June 29, 2024)*

Pari draws a different kind of power from Kali's dark skin and nonchalant attitude. She learns from Kali how to embrace her beauty and be fearless in choosing her path, not yielding to societal pressures and rules. She said,

> *Kali brings in a lot of dash like she is an unabashed hero of her life. So, the masculine and feminine. So, I think every human being comes with a bit of a masculine and a bit of a feminine side, and she is the aura that, just don't be afraid of choosing what you're choosing. And, yeah, I always like Maa Kali because I was told by many people that I'm dark. And I always, when I look at Maa Kali, I feel like, oh my God, if she's so gorgeous, I'm also gorgeous. So, she also gives me a lot of courage, a lot of courage to show up. I would say to unveil yourself, show up the way you are. It doesn't matter because you will kill it. (Pari Ghosh, July 16, 2024)*

Pari's idea of Durga helped her question the patriarchal norms linked to marital symbols and marriage as an institution. She expressed her frustration with *Dashami Siddur Khela*[212] where only married women can participate. Vermilion for Pari symbolizes the celebration of the goddess and her power, not marriage. She challenged the patriarchal norm of women wearing marital symbols after marriage. It is society that forces women to wear those symbols, not a personal choice. She remarked,

[212] *Siddur Khela,* or vermilion game, is played on the last day of Durga Puja, which is *Dashami*, by married women to bid farewell to the goddess. Vermilion is associated with the concept of marital felicity and serves as a visible marker of a Hindu woman's marital status in India. It is a wedding custom.

> *I talked about Maa Durga. She doesn't wear siddur or শাঁখা পলা[213] when she killed Asur [demon]. So, she doesn't, she's not symbolically showing that she's married. And that's why I thought Asura could try and seduce her. And he tried because Durga had no symbol yet. She kind of ensure that, you know, I can kill you. And I can more kill you because you're trying to seduce me as I'm not wearing all the symbols that I should wear. Okay. So, I think that if a woman wants to believe that she can kill her demons, she has to believe in herself. She doesn't have to hold or carry some baggage, which is gifted by some other gender, or which is gifted by the society. So the husband gives you siddur, the society gives you শাঁখা পলা. So, I think Durga is just barring all of that. Right. And, and I think from the, if we can see gender through that lens, it would have been very, very much helpful for women to also see themselves, because women see themselves just on the day of Dashami, which is very problematic, I feel. Because we see ourselves as just what do they call, এয়োস্ত্রী[214]. So এয়োস্ত্রী can only perform the right. Who says that? Right. It's just siddur. Siddur is not about symbolically marriage. Siddur is about celebration. (Pari Ghosh, July 16, 2024)*

Pari's idea of Durga encouraged her to believe that women do not necessarily have to bear the social baggage of wearing marital symbols if they choose not to. Women are fully capable of defeating the demons, and by demons, she meant the patriarchal barriers and gender norms that women encounter daily. Durga exemplifies this confidence. When Durga kills Mahisasur, she is not wearing any marital symbol. She did not need a man or a male god to help her defeat the demon. Durga's unmarried status gives women the confidence that they do not need a male figure to conquer these demons.

Pari also learned from Durga's nature not to be at the beck and call of others and to prioritize herself, her work, and her time. As women, Pari noted, we are expected to be at the service of the family all the time. But goddess Durga is not available all the time. She knows her worth. Then, why should women allow themselves to be available all the time? She said,

> *Then when the devatas (male gods) were doing the meeting, she [Durga] would have commented that okay, let me help you. She did not. She waited for the devas to come together and pray strongly, to help with the formation of her. I will only be formed if you seek help from me. So as a human, it's very tough. I practice nonviolent communication genuinely because I see there are problems there. There was a point of time I used to help around people like I do, you know, go there. I help take care of it. But now I'm in a space where I want people to reach out to me who can. Like if they need me, they will reach out to me. I don't have to go say that. Do you need help? Can*

[213] Traditional bangles worn by Bengali married Hindu women in West Bengal.

[214] এয়োস্ত্রী is a Bengali term which means married Hindu women living with their husband.

I help you? Can I wait for you to get us? No, Ma Durga doesn't. So, I will also not. (Pari Ghosh, July 16, 2024)

When Pari said that she views herself as embodying the traits of the three goddesses, Durga, Kali, and Rajrajeswari, she meant that she strives to live life on her own terms, just like these goddesses, and stay detached from societal expectations. She commented,

I'm a pack of these women, including the live [real life figures] ones and also the goddess. Yeah. I think I'm, I'm a part of everything that they have gifted me in, in my life, and I will continue with that. The genuine care that I don't give a fuck of anything. I'm sorry for using that word, which Kali does. And the Durga, when she's killing the asura, she just doesn't care about anyone. This is my job. I do that, and there are days when I'm having my deadlines. I just don't care about myself. I don't care. If that is my job, I will do that, and I have missed a lot of things due to that, and I think people judge me for that, you know, you are at the end of the day, you're doing service, but for me, that is my job. And I'm very proud of what I do. And do it with a lot of love and care. And. And I also see Durga. Maybe she had a lot of other work to do, but that day she chose to kill the asura. (Pari Ghosh, July 16, 2024)

Pari further added,

Rajeshwari is coming to bring peace with our people, with her own self, Durga is coming to kill asura and celebrating, Kali is coming to kill the demon and getting celebrated. And Itu[215] is talking about how we can nurture, care, grow crops, and farm. So, every single goddess is doing her job. So know what your job is. You will Shine. And maybe nobody's going to worship. But when you look at yourself, you will see the reflections of all the goddesses that you, you, you will have that agency, that power, that mindset, that skills to do everything possible in, in life. (Pari Ghosh, July 16, 2024)

Pari recognized the immense power in choosing to do what you want, just like the goddesses. She emphasized that the goal is not to be worshipped as a goddess, but to learn from their actions and activate that inner power of the goddess by pursuing the work one loves and respects. Pari had a revolutionary view of gods and goddesses. For her, goddesses are unbreakable and unbeatable, challenging the barriers trying to control them. She shared her vision of the goddess, saying,

So when I see the goddess, I want her to do what she really wants. And no matter what the barrier is really is even if she's sad. She should break that barrier. And do what is

[215] Itu is a regional goddess who is tied to agriculture and is worshipped in West Bengal. She is worshipped mainly by people from rural areas.

needful at that point of time. No matter what stops her, she shouldn't be stoppable. She should be unstoppable. (Pari Ghosh, July 16, 2024)

Mou believes in feminist ideology and sees goddesses as empowering and emancipatory. She stated,

I think, you know, especially as, I would rather put it as an urban, woman, I mean, this idea of a goddesses, being represented in the form of emancipation, especially if you are looking at this figurine of Durga or if you are looking in figuring of Kali. I think that it is, probably, as a modern woman is something that I resonate and relate to. It is also something, you know, I would say it is, it is, it is, it perhaps allows you a kind of, expression, you know, because, it gives you a sense of continuity as a woman because, you know, since I'm an academician and, of course, you know, this idea of feminism is something that of course interests me or I wish to discuss. So therefore, you know, in the, in the subcontinent or in the very Bengali milieu, so this is like a sense of continuity. So, women here perhaps tend to have a more, sense of, I would say, where they express, where they can, put across their thoughts. This I think somewhere has with this idea of the goddesses, that we, probably, you know, it's not about just worshipping and it's also about having it in our vocabulary that, sort of, gives you that kind of sense of emancipation. (Mou Mitra, December 10, 2023)

Mou's perception conveyed that when it comes to worshipping the divine feminine, it should not be restricted to its ritualistic aspect. Instead, women should incorporate the idea of the power present in the divine feminine understanding in their everyday lives. It is about applying that power to question the patriarchal system and gendered notions. Mou believed that Durga, Kali, Lakshmi, and Saraswati are the epitome of power, replacing the overbearing presence of male gods like Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva by establishing themselves as equally important deities in the Hindu religion. Mou perceived Kali as a destroyer and Durga as a protector, both superior to their male counterparts. She said,

You know, even in the figure of Kali, I would think, you know, she's a destroyer of evil. And it's a kind of continuous reminder. And, you know, where perhaps there has been a failure of the male, I would say, structure of gods in that way. It is where the goddesses actually, succeed (Mou Mitra, December 10, 2023).

Mou can identify with the power of the goddesses as an urban, educated woman who is successful in her career and possesses the ability to exercise control over the financial and emotional aspects of her life. She also encourages her female students to realize the power in the goddesses' representation and incorporate that vocabulary into their own lives to navigate challenges. Mou can relate to the goddesses

on the grounds of gender as well. She feels that because the goddesses are female too, it is easier to communicate her problems to them. She can draw the goddesses' power to deal with life's challenges and learn from them the ability to withstand the obstacles. She questioned the patriarchal depiction of goddess imagery and stated,

> *I think I tend to comment on how you are visualizing or imagining this figure of goddesses. How much is that power? How much is that, you know, a creation, of a patriarchal society? How much of it is, how the patriarchal society wishes to look at this? (Mou Mitra, December 10, 2023)*

Mou further emphasized the patriarchal view of goddesses, which depicts goddesses like Kali and Durga as domesticated figures. She noted,

> *With Goddess Kali putting her feet on the chest of Siva, it is also trying to say that ultimately, and even in spite of all the, strength, ability that you are really talking about the goddesses, you are still trying to synchronize her and, you know, still trying to place her somewhere within, the frame of somebody who is family oriented. Somebody who is, who is, who believes in this structure of, structure where the male continues to be the head, even if it is not overtly presented. But you know that titular representation, this acceptance. So, it is a way that you know, this, this, you know, even the goddesses are made to conform and play by is what gets translated into the society. (Mou Mitra, December 10, 2023)*

Mou indicated that even the goddess is not spared from the patriarchal conception of women's roles, where, despite her great power, the focus remains on her domestic roles as a wife, daughter, and mother. Mou highlighted patriarchal society's anxiety with the depiction of Kali and Durga as embodiments of power who have complete control over their bodies, sexuality, and actions. Kali is a provocative figure, dusky, nude, and perpetually angry, killing demons. She is not submissive, and her appearance challenges patriarchy. Kali breaks many stereotypes about how women should look and dress. Patriarchy fears Kali's power, and through narrow portrayals, patriarchal society tries to control Kali and keep her distant from ordinary women so that they do not find empowerment in such a fierce figure. Kali's strength embodies assertiveness, autonomy, confidence, and resilience, qualities that defy traditional expectations of women in a patriarchal society. Expressing her admiration for the empowering aspect of Kali's imagery, Mou commented,

> *You know the figure of Kali, the goddess Kali fascinates me. You know, especially in a, you know, in a culture where we have been so obsessed with how to project a woman, you know, how she should be clothed, etc., this, this, this worship of the goddesses in her all fury and of course, the fact that she is also a dark goddess, you know, and it is, I think, you know, a very interesting way of understanding that how perhaps, the woman power or the dusky woman, you know, she probably has, too much of a power to handle, and therefore the society would rather worship her and rather have her in, in actual spaces. So therefore, these powers, this release are something that subconsciously society is afraid of. Therefore, worshipping it is a distance that it probably wishes to create between real women and goddesses. So, you know, they are they, and so they cannot be real. So, it fascinates me, you know, and therefore, I think somewhere down the line, that is what also I think should be the aspiration of most women. And this is what the society is not completely comfortable with. So, if you realize that you have this [power], society will actually bow down, will accept the way that you are. So, you need to be, you know, assertive. (Mou Mitra, December 10, 2023)*

Mou argued that most women focus on the celebratory aspect of Durga Puja. However, the focus should be on the concept of the goddess's power and how she uses that power to defeat the demons. The stories of goddesses testify to the supreme energy of figures like Kali and Durga, displaying "a tremendous amount of physical power" (Mou Mitra, December 10, 2023). This challenges the idea of women as weaker or secondary to a man's physical strength. The stories of goddesses prove what a woman is capable of and go beyond the gendered norms imposed on women. Instead of succumbing to patriarchal pressure, Mou urges women to tap into that power in order to break patriarchal boundaries.

Mou's perception of goddesses made her consider how male supremacy influences the daily lives of South Asian women. She said that women are not financially independent enough and rely on men in South Asian families to make financial decisions for them. This is because they cannot make their own financial choices, file their taxes, or know where to invest. When thinking about Durga, she mentioned that most people think of her receiving energy from male gods, which she then uses to kill demons. However, the focus should be on her ability to wield a level of power that no other male god can match, allowing her to defeat thousands of demons alone. But the focus remains on the dominance of male energy, which then affects the daily lives of women both at home and in the public sphere.

When Mou said she could relate to the power of the goddess, she meant understanding that power to question every aspect of women's lives and how society views goddesses. It is about recognizing our rights as women, being independent financially and mentally, valuing our space, and protecting our lives. It is important for women to move beyond just the nurturing aspects of the goddess and also connect with the power that represents physical strength and empowerment. Addressing the issue of domestic violence that many South Asian women experience and hardly take action against such violence, Mou believes that channeling the power of the divine feminine provides women the strength and belief to end violence in their daily lives. Mou stated,

> *A lot of women, you know, it's not you know, we get just basically often concerned about the educated woman, you know, but, what about the other periphery? I mean, I wonder, even within educated spaces, there are a lot of women who take in domestic violence and other things. So even these figures of goddesses, once they start to resonate, or once, you know, I, completely imbibe the kind of power that they represent, I think it becomes a kind of inner strength or inner source of then getting back and doing, you know what otherwise, you know, I probably as women, we often are not able to think, especially in terms of our, physical ability, our ability to deal with tremendous crisis. (Mou Mitra, December 10, 2023)*

Debolina shared similar views with Mou. She pointed out the problem with the domesticated depiction of goddess figures and the inherent need to always categorize them as consort goddesses. She argued that indigenous goddess figures like Bonobibi have a more independent representation compared to mainstream deities like Durga, Kali, and Lakshmi, who are part of the Brahmanical Hindu pantheon of goddesses. These goddesses are depicted based on the Brahmanical patriarchal model of womanhood, which limits their complex portrayals. In contrast, regional or indigenous goddesses are goddesses of the periphery. They are worshipped in their original forms. There is no obligation to define them as consort goddesses of male deities. She stated,

> *For example, I think that in every religion, the Goddess has been shown as a consort of a male gods. It can be the spiritual consort, or it can be the consort like husband and wife. But I think that the entire structure is very patriarchal. We never say that Vishnu is the consort of Lakshmi. Rather, we say that Lakshmi is the consort of Vishnu. We never say that Siva is the spouse of Parvati. But we always say is that Parvati, the spouse of, Parvati is the wife of Siva, right? This is a very patriarchal concept, but if*

> *you go to a tribal community, you will see that there were a lot of deity like Aranyabashini, Bonodebi. Those deities don't have a male consort. (Debolina Maitra, February 22, 2024)*

Shonali understood the goddess's power as a source of energy that helps her to be assertive and to express her thoughts without hesitation. She learned confidence from Durga and Kali, and wisdom from Saraswati. Speaking about her personal life, the problems she faced in continuing her higher studies, her father's illness, and managing the family's finances, Shonali initially struggled a lot. She recounted how not being assertive or confident enough to express her thoughts led her to succumb to the social pressure of getting married. But Kali provided her with the strength to sail through hard times. Shonali said,

> *On the one hand, there was this situation where I had to deal with an ailing father, where my mother was gradually taking up more responsibilities. My father was a businessman, so there was no service that he could, you know, fall back on. And, of course, my mother, she has been a very active lady. She was also very active participant in the business. So, I could see her taking care of the business, the family, the ailing husband, and also dealing with this external pressure of, as I said, neighbors, external family members, to, you know, them asking constantly and repeatedly creating pressure to get the girl married off. Instead of sending her for higher studies. I could see that they were gradually succumbing, which, kind of put me in a situation where I had to be assertive. I had to find my voice. I had to exert my desire that no, I don't want to get married now. I desperately want to go for higher studies. And, I know that I have potential. I want to have a career of my own. I resorted to her [Kali] image as a source of power and a source of energy. So, I used to get a lot of this positive vibe, positive energy from her, and, gradually, I don't know, probably from her only or it was, my imagined interactions with her, I started gaining this positive energy where I got also the confidence to exert, my willingness, my desire to, you know, express what I wanted to do in life. So, I started exerting things. And then when it started, it took a good 6 to 8 years for my father to, you know, get well again. And by the time I completed my graduation, my master's and, like, I convinced them that you give me the time so that I can, at least complete the formal education. (Shonali Roy, February 15, 2024)*

Shonali expressed how she shared her anxieties with the goddess Kali, who provided her with the safe space and the strength required to survive as a woman in a patriarchal society. Kali gave Shonali the courage to fight the social expectations imposed on her. She defined Kali as a "source of power" (Shonali Roy, February 15, 2024). She said,

> *With no one else in the surrounding to share my problems, my anxieties, I could actually resort to the powerful image of Goddess Kali who gave me enough strength, inner strength, emotional strength, and confidence. So that I also started gaining an agency for myself to exert myself, my desires to my family as well as, I would say, encounter the pressure which was created by these people in the neighborhood and the extended family. So most interestingly, I had to fight with them in several sort of ways, sometimes to the extent that they stopped, you know, connecting with me. But that time the desire was so much that I forgot about the world. All of that I could do because I believed that I, at that point of time, could believe in such a source of power, source of energy. And, in a way, it gave me the confidence so that, I can, you know, put my foot very strongly in front of the world. Rather, I would say, it prepared me to face the challenges of life. So that way, I gained a lot of agency, I believe, without realizing it at that point of time. But when I look back that, period of my life, I can clearly understand that there was this belief system in me which helped me a lot to come out of that situation. (Shonali Roy, February 15, 2024)*

For Rishita, Kali and Durga are fascinating because the stories highlight the unruly side of the goddess imagery. Rishita is an independent young journalist, living on her own. She worked in different states in India due to the nature of her profession and spent much time in northern India. She does not identify as a religious person who believes in rituals or faith. Yet, she finds the imagery of Kali and Durga to be thought-provoking. Speaking of Kali's power and persona, Rishita mentioned that in Bengal, goddesses are the epitome of empowerment, unlike in North India, where people prefer worshipping the docile goddess imagery. Kali is her idea of empowerment. Rishita described her as an "empowering icon" (Rishita Banerjee, March 31, 2024). She commented,

> *I started kind of looking at Kali also, and you know, so that the, the kind of role, how do I see the kind of feminine attributes that she kind of espouses are, also, again extremely different from any other female deity across, you know, kind of India. And she's also not even like Durga, like she's even more aggressive. She's even darker. (Rishita Banerjee, March 31, 2024)*

Kali's imagery for Rishita stands in stark contrast to the women she encountered throughout her life. Society taught her to be docile, obedient, and submissive, but here is Kali, feared, worshipped, and venerated, an anomaly to the traditional depiction of calm and quiet goddesses or even the highly glorified Sita. She is a woman with a weapon, most importantly. Rishita highlighted that aspect in her interview, saying,

> *It's the kind of juxtaposition they kind of bring as opposed to the kind of women that we are seeing or the kind of women we grew up seeing or the kind of women we kind of feel. There is this oppression that is, you know, constantly part of the female identity. And we see it in others. We've been experiencing it ourselves. And, you know, so, I think, you know, a lot of it is because it's a woman who, you know, she's a weaponized woman. Firstly, I think I really like the idea of, you know, women having weapons because you barely see them, you know, as a child, you, you know, you rarely saw female soldiers. Even now we're asking, you know, fighting for this chance to, at least in India, send us to combat. So, you know, there are, here are these women who have, like, all these extremely fancy weapons and they're not afraid to use them. They are actively, you know, that their whole purpose is to come and fight a certain, you know, kind of, like Durga for instance, was she came after everyone failed. (Rishita Banerjee, March 31, 2024)*

Rishita learned from Kali and Durga's imagery that she does not need to follow traditional gender roles of womanhood. She can be a woman who fights, lives alone, knows her rights, and is respected for that choice. She continued to say that the idea of the goddess is not only limited to being mighty in battle, but also in the cosmic realm. The goddess is the one controlling the cosmos. She is the universe, which is a highly empowering concept for women in general. Rishita said,

> *And then the Devi is the second force and she is the more powerful force apparently, or something like that. It's, it's a bit convoluted but that is what I understand is, so in the sense, empowering. Well, that is the only space where you saw that the woman was more powerful. You know, in a cosmic space, she's supposed to be more powerful in, like, you know, and then all these men bow down to her, who, you know, who ask her to come, evoke her when they need her. So, you know, it's like it kind of showed how much dependent men are on women. Kali was not I mean, as far as I know, she wasn't fighting demons. She was the goddess of demons, which is, I think, you know, even, you know, because all the ideas of women, the ideas associated with women are like, you know, purdah [veil] or soft spoken or in the kitchen. I don't see Kali as somebody who's cooking meals. So, you know, in that sense, she was somebody who's, you know, I mean, and then the fact that she also loves her husband, but she doesn't care enough why he has to come and fall down at her feet for her to stop. (Rishita Banerjee, March 31, 2024)*

According to Rishita, goddesses like Durga and Kali transcend the traditional gender norms. Kali, the slayer of demons, is also often depicted as a demoness, similar to *Devi Mahatmya*'s description of Kali. Kali and Durga are not just women living their lives under a veil or *purdah,* performing domestic chores. Rishita noted that Brahminical Hindu traditions portray goddesses as docile and domesticated, whereas the Sakta tradition always depicts the goddess as supreme. This empowering image of the

divine feminine helps create space for women to start seeing themselves as capable and powerful. She also highlighted the paradox that in societies where figures like Kali and Durga are worshipped, real women are often not given the same respect and are not encouraged to emulate that power. She said,

> *So I think these concepts, the concepts of these women appearing to be more free, that the fact that they have more, you know, agency more, that they are not like ruled by other men like even Shiv being the most powerful has to come like down for these, you know, for these women. And after that, slowly because I got into, you know, gender and feminism etc., so I, anyways found an interest in, you know, why, you know, what happened to this idea of the Devi you know, why? How can we have this kind of duality where we have this Devi, where we do, you know, kind of worship, this all-encompassing power, and yet we do not give that power or respect to women? (Rishita Banerjee, March 31, 2024)*

These narratives present a powerful image of goddesses that is missing in Hindutva's dominant representations. Although organizations like Rashtra Sevika Samiti and Durga Vahini idealize warrior goddess figures as empowering role models for women to emulate, this idolization is done within the patriarchal framework. However, ordinary Hindu women I interviewed understand goddesses in ways that give them the power to dismantle patriarchal systems. The narratives highlight the immense admiration for Kali, who emerges as a highly empowering model for women. She is depicted as dark, scary, unruly, a non-conformist, a demoness, and gory. Kali is naked, angry, and constantly killing. Women's love for this imagery of Kali is so intense that she has become an icon. This immense admiration for Kali tells the story of women being fed up with the patriarchal system and channeling Kali to break stereotypes, gendered norms, and the traditional idea of Hindu womanhood.

3 THE POLITICAL GODDESS: HINDU WOMANHOOD AND INTERSECTIONS IN HINDUTVA GODDESS IMAGERY

Women rejected the ideal Hindu womanhood model and the concepts of honor and modesty imposed by Hindutva groups, evident in their perception of goddesses as non-conformist figures. Hindutva organizations support the Brahmanical patriarchal system that is reflected in the dominant narratives of goddesses and their idea of the ideal Hindu woman model. Brahmanical patriarchy supports caste

and gender hierarchy (Chakravarti, 1993). Brahmanical patriarchy promotes the concept of ideal Hindu womanhood, which is attained through the subjugation of women. This subordination is manifested in terms of control over women's sexuality, bodies, freedom, and choices (Bharadwaj, 1999, pp. 137-138). The subjugation is also maintained through religious practices, patriarchal customs, and laws imposed on women (Bharadwaj, 1999, p. 137). Religion is deeply tied to the concept of Hindu womanhood, as Brahmanical patriarchy imposes the model of "pativrata dharma[216]" (Bharadwaj, 1999, p. 137; Chakravarti, 1993), which expects women to conform to the standards of the ideal Hindu woman who is dedicated to her husband and family (Chakravarti, 1993). This image of Hindu womanhood is rooted in the notions of women's purity and chastity, which are upheld through the observance of religious practices such as *vratas* (fasting) (Bharadwaj, 1999), adherence to Hindu customs and values, and modesty. It is vital to maintain women's purity and chastity to preserve "patrilineal succession" (Chakravarti, 1993, p. 579) and "caste purity" (Chakravarti, 1993, p. 579). Hindu nationalist discourse internalizes the Brahmanical patriarchal conception of Hindu womanhood and promotes ideas of women's purity and chastity to maintain caste purity, which is reflected in the idea of the Hindu goddesses.

The women I interviewed discussed the political use of the goddess in creating an ideal image for Hindu women. Their narratives show how women negate the concept of Hindu womanhood that Hindutva promotes. Most of the women I interviewed questioned the very idea of Hindu and Hindu womanhood. For them, there is no such concept of an ideal Hindu woman. Women questioned the caste aspect in the imagination of goddesses and the Hindu woman model in the Hindutva framework. Hindu nationalists, through the homogenized understanding of goddesses as chaste, sacrificial,

[216] *Pativrata* ideology, also known as *Pativrata dharma*, is where a wife views her husband as a god and dedicates her life to serving him. She is expected not to question her husband and should always follow him. A true pativrata is believed to possess special powers that protect and safeguard her husband's life (Dhruvarajan, 1988, pp. 273-274). See Dhruvarajan, V. (1988). Religious Ideology and Interpersonal Relationships within the Family. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, *19*(2), 273–285, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41601380 for more information.

domesticated, and occasionally militant, present a narrow, monolithic idea of Hindu womanhood that does not reflect the voices and lived experiences of ordinary Hindu women. The struggles and the barriers women face are missing from the narrative of Hindu womanhood, as are the intersecting identities of caste, gender, class, and ethnicity in the concept of Hindu womanhood.

Women spoke about how deeply political the goddess's presence is in mainstream Indian politics under the BJP government. Women's narratives expose the political uses of religion, goddesses, and mythological icons in shaping citizenship, nationalism, and gender roles. The idea of Hindu womanhood is limiting and alien to most women I interviewed. Based on their plural and diverse perceptions of goddesses, which affirm women's empowering portrayal, their realities, and their struggles, women forged their own vocabulary of womanhood, one that is defiant, resistant, and stands outside Hindutva's framework on Hindu women. It is also plural, grounded in choice, freedom, and valuing the lives of women.

A strong advocate of anti-caste politics, Madhabi bluntly said, "There is no ideal Hindu woman" (Madhabi Mondol, December 22, 2023). Madhabi highlighted the Brahmanical Hindu angle in the imagination of gods and goddesses by the Hindutva political parties and the flawed idea of Akhand Bharat. She said,

> *Because of this idea of Akhand Bharat, then little bit of what is going around in mainstream politics, the, the, the gods and goddesses are getting, you know, or rather, the Brahmanical Hinduism is getting more highlighted. (Madhabi Mondol, December 22, 2023)*

She further added,

> *Whatever is going around in current politics, be it Hindu nationalism or be it this concept of Akhand Bharat, they are kind of making Brahmanical Hinduism as the as the only Hinduism. They are trying to create a kind of a homogeneity among different kind of sects and religious sphere. (Madhabi Mondol, December 22, 2023)*

She highlighted the growing presence of the Brahmanical Hindu concept of gods and goddesses, emphasizing the significance of the goddess in today's socio-political context for shaping the image of Hindu women. She said,

> *I think in, the Indian context, goddess right now did play a really important part because they represent the idea of ideal womanhood. The ideal womanhood, and also always these goddesses, the image of the goddesses, they represent a kind of motherly married woman's figure, of course, Hindu woman's figure. And that is a kind of aspiring image for all the Indian women. And somehow the nation wants all the, you know, all the women from India to become like the goddess. Be powerful but from within. (Madhabi Mondol, December 22, 2023)*

Madhabi argued that this image of Hindu women differs from the image of a Western woman, referencing the figure of Bharat Mata. For Madhabi, Bharat Mata's image is associated with that of a Hindu woman. Hindu women symbolize the purity and honor of the nation, much like Bharat Mata. This image of Bharat Mata, virtuous and pure, is inspired by the Brahmanical Hindu pantheon of goddesses rather than the lower-caste imagination. Bharat Mata is not a Western woman. She is depicted as a married, pious, chaste Hindu woman who symbolizes India. Madhabi said,

> *And then there the image of goddess has played a really important part, because there was this image of how, of Bharat Mata who is also inspired from the Hindu pantheon. She has many similarities from the deities that we worship in Hindu pantheon, and that is ideal version of Hindu woman who is different in many ways due to her attire. She wears saree, red saree. Then she may have certain inscriptions of a married woman or motherhood, but she's not, be with her husband. She is more of a motherly figure, nurturing figure. Yet she's spiritually powerful, and she's the spiritual half of the nation who is not westernized, who is not modernized, and is not changed like the male counterpart. (Madhabi Mondol, December 22, 2023)*

Madhabi raised questions about the caste aspect in Hindutva goddess representations and how this relates to the idea of Hindu womanhood as a Brahmanized concept. She commented,

> *About this ideal womanhood, so I, I personally think that the goddess comes from an upper caste Hindu background. She's an upper-caste Hindu woman. And the image of the Goddess is the image of upper-caste Hindu mother. So she is, of course, pious, austere, and she's a, of course, very faithful woman. And she's a chaste woman. She is a mother figure. And these are the qualities that are cherished in an Indian woman. And that's the reason why I think that this figure is actually representing the ideal Indian*

> *womanhood. Not womanhood in general, but ideal Indian womanhood. (Madhabi Mondol, December 22, 2023)*

As Hindutva organizations forcefully create and recreate ideas of goddesses and the Hindu woman model, Madhabi, in her response, referenced the image of Hindu women that was constructed during colonial times and gradually changed with the shifting landscape of Indian politics. It was not until Hindutva that Indian politics began to think about homogenizing the concept of Hinduism and the Hindu woman identity. She said,

> *There is no singular definition of Hindu as I have pointed out. So not I only I personally do not feel that this is my own opinion. But if you look at certain works by eminent feminist, they also will analyze how there was no singular Hindu identity in the colonial or pre-colonial period. But it wasn't for construction due to the introduction of personal law and later the Hindutva politics, it has created a kind of image of Hindu woman. (Madhabi Mondol, December 22, 2023)*

Madhabi argued that the concept of Hindu womanhood only embodies an upper-caste, bourgeoisie woman image rooted in orthodox Brahmanical Hindu tradition that Hindutva supports. Madhabi shared in her interview how Indian women are gradually being seen as upper-caste Hindu women under the BJP government. She referred to the homogenizations of the Indian woman's identity. An Indian woman is equivalent to a chaste, elite, virtuous Hindu woman under Hindu nationalism. She commented,

> *And the orthodox Hindu society, they tried to create another or emerge as another identity and they tried to emphasize or tried to confine their [women] at home from within. And they focused on the religiosity. As men had to go out and mingle with the Britishers, they were not able to claim their purity as such. But women, they used to stay at home, and they were considered to be the more pure and less westernized version of Indian society. And hence they were like more Hindu, more Indian women. So, this idea of Indian women was transformed into Hindu women. And that Hindu woman is something which is a homogeneous identity, and of course, that identity inculcated the ideals or the values of the upper-caste Hindu women, not the lower caste or other castes in the women. And that has become the kind of homogeneous Indian woman identity. Indian woman equals to upper-caste Hindu woman. And that virtues, those virtues are ideal virtues that should be pursued by all Indian or Hindu women. (Madhabi Mondol, December 22, 2023)*

Like Madhabi, Debolina highlighted the evolving nature of the Bharat Mata model and the caste element within the idea of Bharat Mata. According to her, Hindutva groups are exploiting the Bharat Mata symbol for their own political goals. She stated that Bharat Mata was a political figure painted by Abanindranath Tagore, inspired by Japanese-style painting. She pointed to the global image of the figure Bharat Mata, which Hindutva groups later saffronized. She stated,

> *But it has nothing to do with this whatever now Hindutva politics, you know, trying to propagate. It's just using and abusing. I think it's basically use and abuse of deities for the politics. (Debolina Maitra, February 22, 2024)*

Debolina strongly emphasized that the upper-caste Hinduized Bharat Mata[217] is not India. She stated,

> *Think about, I'm looking at Bharat Mata right now, and now I can see there are a lot of lotuses are near her feet, and there is a halo beside her face. Yeah. That's it, so yeah, it is basically imagined India, imagining India. It's not the India. Yeah, it's, it's basically the upper-caste image. It's a more Hinduised imagined India, but that doesn't represent India. It's a more, you know, basically the people who painted it who conceptualized that, they were very educated people, elite people. And there was always, we know, that there was cultural nationalism before the political nationalism. So, it's a more a symbol of cultural nationalism rather than a political nationalism. (Debolina Maitra, February 22, 2024)*

Adding to the virtuous and pious image of the Hindu woman model, Mimi Bose, an art historian by profession, discussed how goddesses, like Sita, play a significant role in mainstream politics. Sita is seen as the ideal, moral Hindu woman, and Ram is the ideal Hindu man. Without naming a political party directly, she suggested that the creation of such imagery for Hindu women and men is simply part of a political agenda. Mimi said,

> *I think right now goddesses are playing an extremely important role in political imagery of women and the projection of these ideal women in the, in our time, in this country, where there is sort of political projection of Ram and Sita as the ideal couple. Sita is definitely being projected as this ideal woman. So that is as much political agenda more than a religious one. (Mimi Bose, January 17, 2024)*

[217] By Hinduized Bharat Mata, Debolina refers to the saffronization of the Bharat Mata concept under Hindu nationalists, who now interpret her as the goddess of the Hindu nation and upper-caste Hindus only.

Mimi further emphasized how the image of the ideal Hindu woman is increasingly becoming a part of the everyday realities of women who are expected to follow that representation. She said,

> *I mean, obviously with, you know, people are, there are often political figures who are compared to Durga, and there are political figures, you know, compared to Kali. So, depending on their personality traits, depending on the public dispensation. So, I think this is a comparison or this is an analogy that has been always drawn or, or the fact that someone is considered impersonating traits of Lakshmi when a new bride goes to a family, often it is like লক্ষ্মীর মতো বউ হয়েছে[218], meaning that person is supposed to usher in wealth for the family that are being married into. So, I think there is this analogy of Indian goddesses or Indian female goddesses are constantly drawn in everyday life and from a very micro to a very macro perspective. (Mimi Bose, January 17, 2024)*

Mimi discussed the evolving image of Hindu women in relation to the changing socio-political scenario in India. She explained that the ideal Hindu woman today, based on the goddess's representation in Hindutva narratives, is a new creation forged by right-wing political parties and organizations to reinforce their vision of the Hindu nation. She said,

> *I think you know the notion of the ideal woman has changed over time. While there was a time when there was a Vedic formula to it. It has constantly evolved, for example, with the coming of the British and with the coming of the Victorian norms and all the notions of the private and the public, the notion of that ideal Hindu womanhood also kind of transformed. For example, then also there was this one time when, during the national movement, when the country itself was looked at as this concept of Bharat Mata, of this ideal Hindu mother figure, which everyone could worship. So, consequently, sort of adapted to the requirements of the time and evolved. So, the image of the Vedic woman or the formula of that Vedic have also been sort of tweaked, obviously. For example, during the coming of the Bengal Renaissance, with Rammohan and Vidyasagar, that notion of the ideal Hindu woman underwent a huge transformation. So, I think the notion is constantly in flux and responds to the contingent socio-political structure from time to time. (Mimi Bose, January 17, 2024)*

Mimi expressed frustration with the overuse of goddess models in the socio-political context, stating that there is no room left for personal imagination. Many of these images are casteist and classist in nature. The fixed categories of goddesses' roles in political and social contexts have erased space for

[218] A wife like goddess Lakshmi.

plural, inclusive, and ambiguous representations. It is either a mother goddess or a warrior figure. She mentioned in her interview, saying,

> *There is not much left to the imagination. We already have figures. So, when one, when the goddess is meant to be powerful, and then we can refer to figures like that of Kali. But when we are looking for prosperity, we are looking at Lakshmi, so these images have become very set in our mind. (Mimi Bose, January 17, 2024)*

Suhana struggled to understand the concept of Hindu womanhood. She said, "This, this is a tricky one because who is going to be a Hindu woman is a, is a question to begin with" (Suhana Sengupta, March 29, 2024). She argued that this entire religious connotation attached to the image is itself problematic. She raised the concern that with the majority population in India being Hindu, there is a sudden urge to identify someone as Hindu or a Hindu woman. Religion in India is often assigned to individuals without offering them the option of choice. It has become less of a matter of faith and more of an identity. She expressed her concern about the current Hindutva politics, which frames the vague narrative of Hindus being in danger in India. According to Suhana, these kinds of narratives create an unnecessary urgency to declare a Hindu identity. She defined her own version of the Hindu woman. For her, a Hindu woman is one who is not 'blindsided' (Suhana Sengupta, March 29, 2024) by political narratives and religious dogmatism. For her, a Hindu woman should have the capacity to counter that political narrative and live in a way that contradicts the typical homogeneous formulation of Hindu identity under Hindutva. She said,

> *Most of us are born Hindu women, so I don't suppose we have a lot of choice in it. And there are so many, many of us. I suppose, given the situation at hand, the ideal person practicing any religion, and especially the ideal Hindu woman, would need to be one who gets to practice her religion without it becoming a threat or a source of discomfort to another. There really cannot be a Hindu woman who is biased in her life and activities, who gets to propagate by believing, supporting, or putting her faith behind political forces, which make life a little bit difficult for others around her. (Suhana Sengupta, March 29, 2024)*

Suhana's definition of a Hindu woman is in stark contrast with Hindutva's idea of womanhood, which is based on Brahmanical patriarchal values and has a strong communal undertone, supporting a culture

of hatred towards other religious communities. Suhana addressed the politics of the co-optation of other castes by Hindutva groups to present a monolithic identity of the Hindu woman. She argued that an ideal Hindu woman is not someone from a Dalit community, but Dalit women are getting co-opted into the upper-caste Hindu women model. However, this appropriation has little to do with acknowledging the diversity of identities as Indian women. It is more about gaining votes and promoting the idea of a uniform Hindu womanhood, where the lower-caste identities of women are ignored and erased. She stated that creating our own idea of Hindu women is impossible because existing notions already impose a specific image on women. She remarked,

> *And I would also say that an ideal caste Hindu woman would differ from an ideal woman who is of a Dalit background, but who has been very easily co-opted into Hinduism in, in recent years. So, so what I mean, [upper] caste Hindu women enjoy a lot of privileges naturally, which Dalit people do not. But then for the, for the past few years, we've seen how easily Dalit identities have been co-opted into the broader Hindu-Hinduism umbrella. (Suhana Sengupta, March 29, 2024)*

Suhana indicated how the Bharat Mata is now saffronized, and "Bharat Mata ki Jay[219]" almost turned into a war cry for the Hindutva nationalist groups. The figure of Bharat Mata has been transformed into a communal symbol that rallies against the Muslims. She noted that in this changing image of Bharat Mata under Hindutva, the very essence of that figure is lost. She commented,

> *It's curious because I don't know if this Bharat Mata is equipped with the ability to fight anything, as in, should she fight anything? Is she in a position to do, for instance, the Bharat Mata that Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay thought of, that Abanindranath Tagore drew, she's clearly not a fighter figure, but an icon who is put in place under whose umbrella people can gather. But this, this current Bharat Mata clearly is supposed to be this rallying person who sort of takes the Hindus ahead in their imagined war against Muslims, or protects Hindus as hordes of Muslims, apparently, clearly, they are in a position to attack and lose here. And so, I don't suppose anyone has given thought as to how this goddess figure is supposed to act or even, even express herself. What is her role? Do we even know? And we don't. (Suhana Sengupta, March 29, 2024)*

[219] Hail Mother India.

Pointing to the flawed idea of women's empowerment in Hindutva politics, Suhana stated that most government schemes in India are named after goddesses, offering some money to women. The government does this to create a false impression that it is taking action to develop women's social and economic situation in India, effectively fooling the public. According to Suhana, this is meant to project women's empowerment and economic growth, but it is a cheap imitation of feminist ideas. What Hindutva politics tries to convey through goddesses is an idea of shakti or women's power, but this power is not about subverting the Brahminical patriarchal model. The appropriation of feminist words and ideas, like women's power and empowerment, is to appear progressive and attract the attention of the masses. She said, "I mean that you are [Hindutva] co-opting of this feminist language by using a very unfeminist set of tropes" (Suhana Sengupta, March 29, 2024).

Shonali expressed her concern after seeing the Bharat Mata temple being constructed near her neighborhood. Many people worship this figure and make donations to the temple. She expressed her concern regarding the renewed importance of Bharat Mata under Hindutva politics, saying,

> *There is a place called Shalimar [name changed]. It's like a crossing of five road crossing. Okay, okay. Just, beside that people started worshiping the goddess called the Bharat Mata. Okay. Now, you must have heard about the goddesses. Like I say, the goddess is going to refer to Goddess Durga. Kali and all of them. These are mythical Goddesses. But you know, the concept, Bharat Mata itself, is a very political and probably is the ideal reference or the ideal example that stands at the crossroads of religion and politics. Okay, so if you know a little bit about Hindutva politics, then the emergence of the idea of Bharat Mata is the outcome of that in politics. And inside the temple, since I go there, I travel across that road every day, twice a day. I could see that inside the temple, there is a properly erected stone image of the goddess. Okay. So, my point is that this is a transition which I have experienced and witnessed during the last seven years, to say the least. That is the kind of change and transformation that we are experiencing on a daily basis. Okay. Until now, we have seen people in our surroundings gradually changing. And do you say the least would be that. You know, the social scenario in India, particularly in West Bengal is a deeply religiously divided society. Now, it is a religious, it is a society which is divided across religiosity. (Shonali Roy, February 15, 2024)*

Signaling to the recent Ram temple construction in Ayodhya, Shonali further stated,

> *And when recently there's a temple somewhere in Ayodhya[220] which kind of celebrated this religious, sorry, mythological figure. Rather, you know, there is no such historical evidence. (Shonali Roy, February 15, 2024)*

Shonali is worried about how religion and religious figures under Hindutva politics are leading to the fragmentation of society. According to her, people are blindly following religious figures to support some problematic idea of religious nationalism. She mentioned that religion is intertwined with politics in a way that it is difficult to distinguish politics and religion, as well as logic, myth, folktale, and history. She added that while the presence of goddesses in nationalist politics was once important, this revivalism is now unwanted. According to Shonali, the appropriation of goddesses in the current political context is nothing but a "pure politically motivated" agenda (Shonali Roy, February 15, 2024). She stated,

> *But but now there is a revivalism that we see in mainstream politics with goddesses again becoming very important, but important in the sense that it's for me, it's creating a lot of, a complex situation for people living in India, both women and men and people from the minority sections as well. (Shonali Roy, February 15, 2024)*

Pointing to the significance of religious figures, particularly the goddess, in Indian mainstream politics, Rishita stated,

> *All gods play a deeply political role, especially in India. I think all gods in India are deeply political gods, and there is no kind of deity that is not a politicized deity. And goddesses, particularly, yes, because women are today a large vote bank. (Rishita Banerjee, March 31, 2024)*

Rishita indicated in her interview the regional aspect of Hindutva's goddess portrayal. She discussed the North Indian conception of Hindu goddesses, rooted in an upper-caste, Brahmanical patriarchal narrative that Hindutva discourse supports. She explained how Kali is not favored in North Indian culture because she is a transgressive figure. She said,

> *I think I like Kali the best because I find her the most unruly. So like, even Durga is quiet, you know, Hindu demonized Kali. Kali really gets the shit of these men also in very, in very religious, very Hindu men also cannot, in North India at least they cannot*

[220] Shonali referred to the recent Ram temple built in January 2024 in Ayodhya, India, and inaugurated by PM Narendra Modi.

> *understand, you know they, you know, what is this goddess? And let's not just Kali. Kali has 16 other forms, which are like some of them; she's drinking blood. Some of them she's, you know, it's amazing. So, you know, that whole imagery is very cool to me. And I think it really gets the goat of North Indian Hindu men. So, I love that. (Rishita Banerjee, March 31, 2024)*

Rishita discussed the story of *Chhaya Sita* (Shadow Sita), a unique concept of reframing Sita as a docile, obedient shadow figure of Ram, who is present but mostly absent in the main narrative. Rishita said this concept is very popular in North Indian culture and reflects how the Brahminical Hindu orthodoxy wants women to behave. Rishita said,

> *They [North India] introduced this concept of Chhaya Sita, right? Valmiki. Sorry, Tulsidas, I mean all these amazing, genius tricks to make women look stupid, you know, Chhaya Sita. So, Chhaya Sita is what that Sita, Ram is a god. He knew from the beginning only that all of this was going to happen. So, when, and before she got kidnapped, he fucking changed her. You know, Vishnu changed her, some some shit. Okay, Indra God, somebody came, changed her, it was Chhaya Sita all along. So, Ram also did not put the real Sita through the fire. It was Chhaya Sita who went into the fire. And then the real Sita came out. Okay. And because Ram knew that this one was Chhaya Sita, he could not be held accountable for this. Because you know he's not actually doing it to Sita. It's Chhaya Sita. It is amazing. I mean, it's so crazy. Yeah. So, then Sita is their favorite. North Indians love Sita because Sita doesn't speak, and Sita has a ghunghat [veil]. And yeah. (Rishita Banerjee, March 31, 2024)*

Rishita discussed during the interview the many retellings of the *Ramayana* other than Tulsidas's[221] version that portrayed Sita differently. There are retellings, such as Candravati's *Ramayana*[222], where the author presents the entire epic from Sita's viewpoint (Sen, 2000). However, such retellings are not popular. Saumitra Chakravarty (2022) points to two noteworthy retellings written by two women in the sixteenth century. One was the *Ramayana* by Atukuri Molla, a Shudra (lower caste), Telugu woman who translated the epic in the Telugu language, making it accessible to the general public (Chakravarty, 2022). Another is Candravati's *Ramayana*, a Bengali Brahmin woman poet who wrote *Ramayana* in

[221] Tulsidas wrote Ramcaritmanas in the 16th century, one of many retellings of the story of Ram in a Hindi dialect. Ramayana is originally believed to have been written by the poet Valmiki (Lutgendorf, 1991, pp. 1-4). See Lutgendorf, P. (1991). *The life of a text: performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas.* University of California Press, https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/2027/heb02439.0001.001 for more information.

[222] Candravati is a female poet known for writing the Ramayana from Sita's viewpoint. See Sen, N. D. (2000). Chandravati's Ramayana. In M. Bose (Ed.), *Faces of the feminine in ancient, medieval, and modern India* (pp. 183-191). Oxford University Press, for more information.

the form of a folk ballad (Chakravarty, 2022). Both these women challenged patriarchal norms by breaking the “literary hegemony” (Chakravarty, 2022, p. 170) of the male Brahminical writers. More importantly, these retellings by women stand against the patriarchal and caste, gender, and class-based hierarchies present in India by bringing out the “subaltern voice” (Chakravarty, 2022, p. 169) in the retellings of *Ramayana* (Chakravarty, 2022). However, Tulsidas's portrayal became popular because Sita appears voiceless.

Suhana explained how Sita, who is often seen as a model of Hinduism, is almost absent from the mainstream narrative when it comes to re-embracing Ram and the *Ramayana*. When the Ram temple was recently built in Ayodhya in 2024, it only featured the figure of Ram, with no sign of Sita’s presence. According to Suhana, in the current Hindutva movement, Sita has lost her voice to such an extent that she is nearly absent. A shift happened from people chanting 'Jay Siya Ram' (Victory to Sita and Ram) initially, to the new war cry of 'Jay Sri Ram’ (Victory to Ram). The erasure of Sita’s voice symbolizes the ongoing silencing of ordinary Hindu women in politics and in the political narrative of goddesses in India. Like Sita, women’s voices have long been marginalized and suppressed by Hindutva groups to promote ideas, images, and beliefs that support casteist, classist, and gendered models of Hindu goddesses and womanhood. In a male-dominated Hindu nationalist politics that favors the North Indian view of the goddess, ultimately, Ram is the central figure of Hindutva, not Sita, Durga, or Kali.

There is a culture of vegetarianism practiced in North Indian settings related to the worship of gods and goddesses, which Rishita identified as a highly Brahminical, upper-caste practice. Hindutva groups adopted this upper-caste vegetarian culture in their understanding of Hinduism and Hindu religious figures. The practice of vegetarianism is often imposed by right-wing politicians on goddess worship, even though traditionally, goddess worship involves alcohol, meat, blood, and animal sacrifices. Suhana said,

> *Another thing is the fact that each time there is a puja and there are so many, there are attendant controversy surrounding about rituals, about the eating of vegetarian food and non-vegetarian food, which is almost every year during the Durga puja. You do find a section of right-wing thinkers coming on board with the idea that we should only eat veg. And then there is a back and forth between people who have a very strong idea of what the goddess mother is supposed to be like, how lenient you supposed to be towards people who are eating meat. (Suhana Sengupta, March 29, 2024)*

According to Kabita, Hindu nationalists' use of goddess imagery is nothing but a propaganda tool to attract people, especially women, into politics. She said,

> *These organizations or the Hindu nationalist leaders, they're definitely trying to inspire women, or they are putting the very idea of what is due regard Kali to make them more empowering, or somehow keep them closer, keep them closer to their organization. They're using some tactics and strategies. I would call this some tactical move. Some parts of these leaders are ideologues. These are not very much practical or real things. So, what they're doing is a bit kind of with purely some sort of, you know, ideas that they are trying to sell out. (Kabita Duttagupta, June 22, 2024)*

According to Kabita, it is easier to whitewash the population as they are blindsided by the propaganda of Hindutva politics. Kabita mentioned that every perception varies, and one should have their own idea of how they see goddesses in social and political life. When a person is motivated by an ideology, they follow the representations propagated by that ideology; in this case, the Hindutva ideology. They forget that they are free to imagine the goddess the way they want to. She further stated,

> *You can write whatever you like. So, there is no standardized understanding or perception that this way that goddesses have been produced or introduced, are being introduced into a general social framework or political. It's not like that. It depends and is varies from person to person. (Kabita Duttagupta, June 22, 2024)*

These narratives of the women I interviewed shed light on the intersection of caste, gender, ethnicity, region, and class in Hindutva's ideas of Hindu womanhood and portrayal of goddesses. The women offer a critical perspective on how goddess figures are used in politics to promote religious nationalism and Hindutva's goal of a Hindu nation. As they discussed the use of goddesses by Hindutva organizations, women also questioned the problematic trend of equating women with goddesses in Hindutva discourse, which I discuss in the following section. This trend is a key aspect of Hindu womanhood, built and reinforced through goddess imagery in social and political contexts.

While in this section, women discussed the Hindu womanhood ideal that is maintained through Hindu goddess portrayals in the Hindutva framework, in the next section, through their critical reflection on the idea of women as goddesses, women criticize the Hindu womanhood model.

4 CHALLENGING THE GODDESS TROPE: HINDU WOMANHOOD AND WOMEN AS GODDESSES

The deification of women is tied to Hindu values, dignity, and honor. One of the popular concepts is the idea of লক্ষ্মী মেয়ে[223] or a good woman, which is common in most Indian households. Lakshmi signifies prosperity and wealth. Women are viewed as Lakshmi in India, who brings good fortune to her husband's family. Kabita's face showed irritation and exhaustion as she recalled how her parents always told her to be devoted to the goddess and to be this perfect woman. She used the word 'devihood' to describe the burden placed on women to serve as perfect examples of a goddess in their everyday lives. She commented,

> *And it will make you a good, perfect child, perfect woman, and somehow it would put discipline into your inner self, and you will be a লক্ষ্মী মেয়ে, what we call. So, you can imitate the model of the goddess, and you can have some sort of inspiration that how she is being placed in your daily life, in your domestic affairs. And we, as common you know, Hindu women, we are being told always just to be like a goddess, you need to be a devi always. Just like, you know, you have to keep your দেবিত্য [Devi-like persona] intact whenever or wherever you are going. You are a Devi. So that দেবিত্য or devihood, we are consciously or unconsciously, we are carrying this burden of দেবিত্য in our relations. (Kabita Duttagupta, June 22, 2024)*

The concept of 'devihood' imposed on women is the identity women are expected to maintain, which involves adhering to gendered norms and Brahmanical patriarchal practices. Kabita could not connect with the idea of women as goddesses because there is a significant gap between how women are treated in society and how the goddess is worshipped. In a Hindu patriarchal setup, even the goddess is not free from gendered representations. According to Kabita, when it comes to a good woman's image,

[223] The literal meaning of the term, লক্ষ্মী মেয়ে (Lokkhi meye) is connected to the goddess Lakshmi. Women who resemble Lakshmi bring good luck to the family and are usually viewed as good, obedient, virtuous women.

women are encouraged to follow the docile, domesticated versions of goddesses or goddesses who do not transgress gender norms. They are not encouraged to follow Kali or Durga. Kabita refers to the untamed, unruly, powerful, and transgressive imagery of Kali and Durga, who do not promote any model of ideal womanhood. She stated,

> *Actually, tell you the problem is that we are trying to make our women more like a Lakshmi or Saraswati, not like Durga and Kali. Because when we talk about লক্ষ্মী মেয়ে [good girl] or be like Saraswati, be good in studies, and you should have some specific qualities, you should behave in a particular way. So, what we are talking about is women like Lakshmi, the ideal of Lakshmi, not like Durga or Kali, that's how this social thing has become quite critical and difficult to equate with. If we talk about women becoming Durga, then I think the problem of the puzzle would be very much easier for us to solve. But somehow, we are missing that point. (Kabita Duttagupta, June 22, 2024)*

Kabita questioned the traditional Hindu idea of womanhood, saying, "No, never, I don't believe in such a kind of ideal, you know? And what are the criteria, what are the criteria to be the ideal woman? How do you define? (Kabita Duttagupta, June 22, 2024).

Women's deification of goddesses is not limited to mainstream political narratives but extends to domestic spaces. It is evident in how women are expected to be perfect, like Lakshmi, both in beauty and in their roles as mothers, wives, and daughters. This practice in household settings is a byproduct of mainstream socio-political idolization of goddesses, rooted in Brahmanical patriarchal models and the glorification of the domesticated goddess imagery. In Rastra Sevika Samiti and Durga Vahini, there is a clear association of women with goddesses who are viewed as reflections of Bharat Mata, Durga, and Sita. The right-wing women's group also equates women with Jijabai and Lakshmibai, who are encouraged to follow their footsteps to become virtuous and fearless protectors of the Hindu nation and Hindu values, defending their honor against national enemies.

Madhu draws a parallel between women equated as goddesses and women equated with the nation. She argues that a similar patriarchal trope is applied to women as the nation's daughter and

mother, which is ultimately an overwhelming concept. When women are put on a pedestal and given the status of a goddess, it also raises questions about the good and bad images, which erase the realities of ordinary women who have nothing in common with the goddess. Madhu calls this oversimplification. She said,

> *I think the same narrative goes on when we create our nation with mother, with that female thing. It's definitely overwhelming and over-validation of women. Like I think being a reader of gender studies, certainly I think a woman is always categorized like in the world of binary, you will always see a woman being a villain or a victim. So, you'll always see these two binaries. So, either she's a slut or she's the virtuous women with no flaws at all. So equating women with goddess is actually on the side of oversimplifying that very idea that, that over, the transcending the biological woman, you know, that she's also a female body. She's a body just like you. So, situating someone above the normal benchmark is also a dangerous thing. Then you situate her as a goddess and expect that she will do the thing or you know, do the stuff so perfectly just a goddess does, is just so, that is something I think very problematic for me. (Madhu Haldar, June 29, 2024)*

Madhu argued that this kind of simplification removes any space where imperfection, conflicting emotions, or different perspectives can exist. It involves politicizing the female body to promote ideas of purity, chastity, and modesty. It is a linear storyline where women are supposed to be married, virtuous, perform tasks perfectly, be a mother, also work, but still prioritize family life, and maintain all religious rituals and values as a Hindu. Madhu calls this a "cyclical process" that is never-ending, and this patriarchal trope influences the minds of young girls. More importantly, such a linear understanding of womanhood takes away the nuanced perceptions and ways women interact with society, navigate their lives, and their lived experiences as women of different caste, class, and ethnic backgrounds. Madhu opined, "So for me, an ideal Hindu woman would be any woman who questions the basic structures" (Madhu Haldar, June 29, 2024).

Shonali could not relate to the idea of women as goddesses or a good Hindu woman model, being an independent, unmarried woman living alone in the city. Shonali disagreed with traditional gender notions. According to her, the idea of women as goddesses invariably creates a good and bad woman image, based on which a woman's character is judged. She said,

> *Women are often referred to as goddesses. But that is not how the general treatment, or the general understanding of these women, is often seen in two binary or contrasting ways. On the one hand, they are like uplifted on the pulpit as a goddess. On the other hand, they are treated like a vampire. So, these two extremely opposite images of women are there. (Shonali Roy, February 15, 2024)*

Shonali explained that when Durga is worshipped, she is depicted as Uma, who is primarily a mother figure and is caring, giving, and nurturing. Although she is a warrior, that is a secondary aspect. However, Kali is a transgressive figure. She is not only a warrior but also someone who challenges the entire patriarchal system and structure. Therefore, when women perceive themselves as Kali, this is not preferred. Shonali highlights the dilemma of patriarchal society, which wants women to be goddesses, but only to a certain extent. Women must not imitate the divine feminine essence of true individuality, power, and supreme confidence. If they do and know how to exercise their power, they are categorized as demonesses. Shonali said,

> *When we look at it in terms of the gender dynamics, so, I would say, women in general, as for the gender dynamics is concerned, they are celebrated, their docile nature is celebrated, and it is preferred that they remain that way. But women who have gained such agency, women who have become assertive, who can assert themselves, who can express themselves meticulously, and who can stick to what they believe, who can stand against the status quo, who can challenge the status quo, who can question the already established system. Such women are still not preferred. That is exactly why, when such things happen, they are constantly, what should I say, demonized in a way. Yeah, but Kali is not a demon. Kali is rather the destroyer of the demon herself. So any other goddess be that goddess Durga, Jag Dhatri, Saraswati any other goddess is preferable. But whenever a woman stands on her feet and challenges the status quo, unfortunately she is compared with Goddess Kali. (Shonali Roy, February 15, 2024)*

Mou explained that phrases like “hamari beti hamare liye Durga hae” [Daughter is Durga for us] (Mou Mitra, December 10, 2023) are used to distract from the real barriers that oppress women and the crimes committed against them. The patriarchal view of women as goddesses does nothing to solve the actual problems women face. When women step outside the Brahminical idea of what it means to be a good woman, they are labeled as bad women or women who lack values. In her interview, Mou expressed her appreciation for women who keep challenging the normative. She said,

> *What happens as a woman? Somewhere down the line, we are also told how we should cry, how we should, you know, respond to situations. We should be a little, you know, abala [weak], if I can use the word. I appreciate these women who are able to stand up to this kind of, I think, behavioral patterns that are not okay. (Mou Mitra, December 10, 2023)*

Pari did not believe in the idea of a good wife or the idealized image of a good Hindu woman. As a married Hindu woman, she does not feel bound by the usual marital norms. In her words,

> *I don't have any symbols of a married woman. I don't believe in any symbols. I don't believe that love has anything to do with carrying those symbols. However, I don't, I don't despise people who are doing that. I think it's their choice. However, I do question their choices because if I'm oppressed and if I'm choosing to be oppressed, and if I'm saying that it's okay to be oppressed. Then I have a problem with that. (Pari Ghosh, July 16, 2024)*

Ishita, in her 30s, lives alone, is unmarried, and believes there is no such thing as an ideal Hindu womanhood. Her goddess is fluid, seductive, ferocious, and ambiguous, and does not fit into any fixed category of mother or warrior goddess. So, Ishita also does not have a fixed ideal model in her life. She explained how the word 'Hindu' in modern times has been used as part of propaganda for orthodox Brahmanical Hindu culture. People have forgotten the philosophy behind Hinduism as a religion. She stated that when individuals subscribe to ideas of religion, in this case Hinduism, or to any framework, it is important to reflect on those choices. She raised questions, stating,

> *Some things it's up to you. But are you exercising your choice? Are you at least involving yourself in learning what Hinduism is saying in the first place? Or are you just blindly following something or blindly rejecting something? and whatever religion you follow, is it helping you to become a freer human being every day? (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

Suhana highlighted the urgent need to challenge the idolization of women as goddesses. She said,

> *It's it's very interesting. But at the same time, it's very troubling for us, were kind of trying to understand what is, what is happening because it's, it's going to affect our daily lives. You know, it's already affecting our daily lives, and it's going to be of too much of a burden for women because they have to meet that expectation, because they are equated, like equated with the goddess, like every, they are Durgas, Kalis. Yeah. Parvatis and Sitas and things like that. (Suhana Sengupta, March29, 2024)*

Instead of believing in the patriarchal conception of Hindu womanhood, Suhana is inspired by female journalists who work at the grassroots level to report on ground realities, such as women working as reporters for Khabar Lahariya[224]. Sometimes, women's work as journalists involves working in tough conditions and politically sensitive environments that can put their safety at risk. But the women of Khabar Lahariya keep doing the work to deliver authentic news. She said,

> *Some of the colleagues that I work with are women who write in from tier three or even smaller cities and towns, and why they are journalists, no one knows, except maybe they have this extreme respect for the truth. But then they write the news, they gather the news at great risk to themselves and their families, and, but they continue to do it. So, I suppose they are as close to female role models that I would have. For instance, that in the Uttar Pradesh there is this publication called Khabar Lahariya . And it comprises almost entirely of villagers, of women villagers who sort of in the middle of say they've taken their children to school and their husband has gone out and they have, say they are Asha workers or they have workers or they have other roles that they need to execute. And in the middle of it will take a cycle out, then go to the Panchayat head or the Zilla parishad[225] and gather news, and then they record it and send it over, and then someone types it out. And it's news that reaches us in almost near pristine condition. (Suhana Sengupta, March29, 2024)*

While women journalists of Khabar Lahariya inspire Suhana, Mimi is inspired by figures such as Gulbadan Begum and Razia Sultana, all historical figures from medieval India. These Muslim women were rulers, patrons of art, great warriors, and administrators. She said,

> *Historically speaking, we can think of characters like Razia Sultan, Gulbadan Begum, kind of women who were trying to make a political position themselves in a Islamic world. Characters like the kind of women who are trying to make a political position for themselves in the Islamic empire in India, which would go deeply. Gulbadan Begum, she was also a huge patron of art. But then, you know, Noor Jahan was a very strong woman who had her own patronage of art, architecture, and trade. Historically very strong women. (Mimi Bose, January 17, 2024)*

[224] Khabar Lahariya is India's only digital news medium, website https://khabarlahariya.org/, run by women reporters who cover and bring the rural news to the mainstream urban audience. It covers news from a feminist, secular, and anti-caste perspective (Dixit, 2016). See Dixit, P. (2016, July 20). India's only all-woman rural newspaper has a new challenge: cracking digital publishing. *FactorDaily Archive*. https://archive.factordaily.com/khabar-lahariya-digital-publishing/ for more information.

[225] Panchayat is a local government system in India, and Zilla Parishad is the district-level council.

Women rejected the traditional Brahmanical patriarchal view of Hindu womanhood and the idea that women are divine figures. Many women mocked the concept, laughed at the term, and expressed their disgust. All these reactions show a rejection of categorizing women into simplistic good and bad types of womanhood. Adrita mockingly said,

> *Who is the ideal Hindu woman?!Fuck [laughs]. I don't believe in what all the things the Hindu religion talks about around women. I am not a believer of that. (Adrita Chowdhury, May 22, 2024)*

Similarly, Anisha claimed,

> *I don't know what is an ideal Hindu woman. Actually, I don't know what is ideal woman or what should be ideal woman, or what should be the ideal man. (Anisha Guha, June 22, 2024)*

Debolina laughed at the concept, saying,

> *Ideal Hindu woman? For me? [Laughing] It, I can I ask you who? (Debolina Maitra, Feb 22, 2024)*

The narratives show that, on the one hand, when women refuse to accept the patriarchal trope, they also express their own views on womanhood through their stories and the figures they idolize. This view is not ideal. These women are expressing their personhood or identity in a different way, instead of going by the good Hindu woman model. Their idea of womanhood conveys a woman who questions, values freedom, loves fully, and is not afraid to speak her mind. This image is also closely tied to the kind of lives these women lead, both at home and at work. Their experiences with gender, caste, class, and ethnicity are reflected in their perspective of womanhood. The narratives indicate that there are many ways to remember a goddess, and what we choose to follow is up to us.

During the interview, many women spoke of the paradoxical nature of Indian society and the state that upholds women as goddesses but does nothing to end crimes, violence, and structural barriers against women. A sense of frustration was evident when some women discussed why they do not follow or believe in invoking goddesses in their everyday lives. For instance, Suhana spoke about

Prime Minister Modi's recent Independence Day speech on August 15th, 2025, dedicating the year to mothers and sisters, highlighting the need for safety and empowerment. But in contrast, we see the situation in Manipur[226], where violence against women persists and the government does nothing to end the violence. Suhana stated,

> *The fact that a ruling dispensation which focuses so much on a Bharat Mata figure and is absolutely ignoring the fact that, you know, this happens in India that I suppose that's a constant way in which the goddess politics plays out now. Each time there is a crime against a woman, you bring up a goddess. But then as to what happens to such a, such an invocation that we do that is almost immediately lost. (Suhana Sengupta, March 29, 2024)*

Madhabi does not follow Hindu goddesses because she is a strong supporter of anti-caste politics. She stays away from worshipping Brahmanical goddesses. She discussed the distinction between lower-caste religiosity and Brahminical religious tradition. She stated,

> *The lower-caste imagination of religiosity is quite different from the upper caste. In upper caste religious rituals, you see that the Brahman and there is a goddess or god. It can be Siva, it can be Durga, it can be Kali, and other goddesses which are there in Hindu pantheon. But if you look at the lower-caste religiosity, it is quite different because then they generally form a different kind of sect. The sect-oriented believe which is an offshoot of the Hindu religious system, you may say, but mostly their influence comes from the Bhakti or Sufi movement. And there you cannot see the idol worshiping. Rather, they are devoted to certain kinds of, kind of idea or a religious priest, a religious guru who belong to the same community. (Madhabi Mondol, December 22, 2023)*

Madhabi's comment is about the various religious traditions and cultures that exist in India besides the mainstream goddess figures seen mostly in popular culture, within the Hindutva framework, and in the Brahmanical Hindu pantheon of goddesses. She focuses on inclusive, local, and regional goddess traditions. These regional and local goddess figures explicitly resist the Hindutva framework of goddess imagery, presenting a truly plural and diverse range of forms and worship cultures that celebrate the heterogeneity in Hindu goddess tradition. Not all of these figures that women

[226] This is in reference to the recent ethnic violence in Manipur, India, between the Meitei and the tribal Kuki-Zo communities. In the context of this ethnic violence, many Kuki women are subjected to rape and sexual violence. See Human Rights Watch. (2025, March 27). *India: Ethnic clashes restart in Manipur*, https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/27/india-ethnic-clashes-restart-manipur for more information.

mentioned are part of the Brahmanical goddess pantheon, including the incarnations of Kali that are not worshipped in domestic spaces.

5 INCLUSIVE AND REGIONAL GODDESS

Women depicted goddesses as local, inclusive, regional figures. They addressed the goddess by their regional names, such as calling Durga by names like Uma, Candi, Kali, Tara, Dhumavati, and Kamakhya. They imagined the goddess as embodying a space for all emotions, including rebellion, anger, disgust, and vulnerability. The narratives mention other regional goddess figures as well, such as Bonobibi, Manasa, Rajrajeswari, Itu, and Sitala.

Adrita pointed to the varying appearances and forms of Kali with different skin colours. The different versions of Kali represent various emotions, forms, and stories, highlighting the fluid nature of divine feminine imagination. The goddess appears sometimes black, blue, or red, and no single skin color defines how Kali is visualized or worshipped. Adrita said,

> *And there are so many versions of Kali which I learned from, learned from Gobindo Nagar pandal [name changed] where 51 Kali বহু বছর আগে পূজা হয়েছিল*[227] *I. And they had 51 versions of Kali over there. I remember, I asked my mother that Kali Maa তো কালো বা নীল তো এরকম দুর্গা মায়ের মতো রঙ কি করে?*[228] *Then ma explained some things to me that কালীর বিভিন্ন রূপ আছে। একটা শান্ত, একটা তাণ্ডব, একটা লাস্য*[229] *I And everything is sort of together. She said লাস্য means gentle and তাণ্ডব is destruction, and those were the 51 versions of Kali. (Adrita Chowdhury, May 22, 2024)*

Ishita referred to *Devi Mahatmya's* representation of the goddess figure and how it portrays the goddess in a way that she can most easily relate to. The diversity is not only in terms of the many versions of Candi, whether it be Kali or Dhumavati, but also in terms of emotions such as disgust, anger, fear, disappointment, and happiness, since all these emotions are part of the goddess. Ishita

[227] A long time ago she was worshipped.

[228] How come Kali has so many skin colors?

[229] Kali has many forms and emotions which is peaceful, gentle, and destruction.

highlighted the polarity in goddess imagery. The polarity speaks about plurality in terms of goddess representations and also includes versions of the goddess that challenge Brahmanical patriarchy and the domestication of the goddess. She commented,

> *So, my day begins with the Devi Mahatmya and, and it is so, it is so relatable for me. You know, when I'm feeling scared, my different emotions are associated with her different forms, so I, there's nothing, I feel the goddess is that which makes everything inclusive in life. I don't know if that makes sense like I just thought, আজকে রাস্তায় কিছু দেখে আমার ঘেন্না করছে, বা কোনো কারণে রাগ হচ্ছে। Initially যখন আমি ছোট ছিলাম, মানে রাগ হলে*[230] *I should not be angry, or I should not be disgusted. I mean, Dhumavati is someone who is ok with, who's waiting with her, ok. And she has, she has a crow as a vahana*[231]*, and she looks so she is an embodiment of disgust. So, disgust has space and room for reverence in our culture, ok. And then we have on the opposite side, we have Kamala, who's like an embodiment of absolute beauty and opulence and everything that is beautiful in your life. So, we have both the polarities to be embodied by goddesses, and they have clear, stark representation in our culture. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

She further stated,

> *So, Shakti is that. Shakti is that embodiment of inclusivity in life. So that's what goddess is for me. Like if I am down in the dungeons and nothing is working out for me, that's also her, presenting herself in a different way. And if I am living the best day of my life, that's also her presenting herself in a very different way in my life. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

For Ishita, the goddess symbolizes both success and failure, and there is no single way to understand the goddess. Ishita spoke of the unique red color of the goddess Candi, who sits on five demons. So, Candi in red skin is a different version of the goddess Kali, which is not common in local pandals during Kali Puja. The red-skinned Candi also differs in what the goddess carries in her arms. Ishita described Candi by saying,

> *It's a very different imagery from how we see a Durga or a Kali. She is sitting on five heads. OK. The asana*[232] *is made-up of five beheaded demons. And on that, there is a Lotus. And on that she is sitting cross legged. Her skin is deep red মানে সিদুর লাল*

[230] If I see something on the road, I feel disgust or anger.

[231] Vehicle of a deity.

[232] Place where the deity sits.

> *যেটা বলে*[233] */ That's how her skin is. And she has this beautiful hair coming down and she has the most amazing face. I mean, once again, like art and spirituality, they're so beautifully intermingled in our culture. She has the most beautiful face and she holds the most unusual things in her hands. She has the Chandi Devi Mahatmya in one of her hands. She has four hands, she's a four-handed goddess. She has a rudraksha mala*[234] *in one of the hands and she has Vardan and Abhaya mudra*[235] *in the two other lower hands. Vardan and Abhaya mudra mean that you know she is bestowing fearlessness on us, and she's also reassuring us that whatever you want will be given to you. So, these are the four arms and that's how she's sitting, resplendent in her red saree with that red vibrant skin of hers. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

Ishita pointed to the extreme polarities in the imagery of Candi, saying,

> *And look at the polarity. She's so nourishing. She's so beautiful and she's sitting on five beheaded demons, so that once again, you know, goddess is that polarity, and at every time she's talking about the inclusion of all that is rejected in you. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

Ishita mentioned goddess Karunamoyee, a version of Kali who is known for her compassionate nature. She described Karunamoyee's imagery, stating,

> *Only idol in the world, probably, where usually Ma Kali is black and Siva is white in colour. So that was the only one, that's the only one, one of the only idols where the Kali, the goddess, and Siva both are carved out of the same black কষ্টি পাথর*[236] *(Koshti Pathor) and they are dark in colour. She is known as Karunamoyee, she's called as the, you know, the goddess of compassion, and that people actually go there and that she never, she always fulfills you. You know these kinds of things are not believed or anything like that. But I've also spoken to many people, the local people, the unlearned ones, the very clear, naive but innocent ones who come from that very clear space of faith and devotion, and for them her presence is life-changing. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

Both Ishita and Madhu mentioned the Kamakhya temple in Guwahati, India, which worships various versions of Kali and the goddess's *yoni* (vagina). Ishita described the place as a significant Sakta worship site. She said,

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[233] The goddess's red color matches the vermillion's red.

[234] A garland made from the dried seeds of the Rudraksha tree, worn mainly by Lord Siva in Hindu mythology and ascetics.

[235] The *Vardan* and the *Abhaya mudra* are hand gestures. *Vardan* mudra means blessings. *Abhaya* mudra symbolizes protection.

[236] Koshti Pathor is a dark-colored stone that is used to carve the goddess idol.

> *OK, so the temple is built on a hill. And so, at the point you have to walk to reach the temple, and that's a very sacred walk that's considered as a really sacred walk among, let's say, the aghoris [ascetics] or the saktas [goddess worshippers] of our times. The ancient times also. (Ishita Dasgupta, July 27, 2024)*

For Madhu, Kamakhya embodies the multifaceted nature of the goddess Kali, encompassing aspects such as anger and rage. According to her, a specific categorization of goddesses is not possible because the divine feminine is complex, diverse, and embodies multiple emotions. She said,

> *So that is something I think, this diversity actually makes us think more about it. So yeah. There is no categorization. One categorization, right? There are multiple narratives around. (Madhu Halder, June 29, 2024)*

Debolina spoke of Tara, another version of Kali, who is very popular in West Bengal. There is a temple in Birbhum district of West Bengal called Tarapitha, a renowned shakti pitha[237] where this form of Kali is worshipped. Debolina said,

> *I heard that my parents, especially my father, they are, I mean, they are the devotee of kind of Ma Tara, what we call Ma Tara which is basically in Tarapith which is basically a kind of a form of what we can say, it's a form of Matrika. Right. So basically, this Candi or Chamunda or whatever we call in the medieval period, that form got transformed into Tara, the Hindu Tara, not the Buddhist Tara. (Debolina Maitra, February 22, 2024)*

Regarding the local goddess figure, Debolina mentioned the worship of goddess Kichakeswari in Mayurbanj, Odisha, India, a variation of Camunda. She commented,

> *If you go to Mayurbhanj, you will see that there was a goddess called Kichakeswari. So that is the, I mean, I just want to tell you that I just want to explain you that, you know, the tribal society, which is more open, you know, that always used to worship the goddesses. (Debolina Maitra, February 22, 2024)*

When discussing the many versions of goddesses, Debolina also mentioned the Brahmanization[238] of the local goddesses, which includes Candi. She indicated that the original worship culture of the goddess persists in local or regional forms. She said,

[237] Shakti pitha is a sacred site where the goddess's power is worshipped.

[238] Brahmanization is a process in which local or regional deities are assimilated into Brahmanism.

> *Then there was a very interesting thing that happened in history: there was an integration of settlements, tribal settlements within the Brahmanical culture that happened. And we have seen that in tribal communities, there were more local goddesses rather than gods. Like Candi, Candi was a local goddess, but later she was incorporated into the Brahmanism. (Debolina Maitra, February 22, 2024)*

In the process of Brahmanization of local goddess worship, Debolina pointed out the gradual domestication of goddesses whose imagery as mere warriors is unsettling to the traditional roles expected of women. Brahmanization serves as a way to present a softer version of a female warrior image that does not threaten masculine power or dominance. For her, the original understanding of the goddess is indigenous and not the Brahmanical version, as she stated, "There has always been a difference. And that is the example. You know, goddess means something tribal" (Debolina Maitra, February 22, 2024).

Tara, Kali, Bhairavi, Dhumavati, Chinnamasta, and Kamala are all part of the ten goddesses known as the *Dasa Mahavidyas* (or *Mahavidyas*), which are a part of the Sakta tantric tradition (Shin, 2010, p. 4). Each of the forms has its own shrine and is an independent deity (Shin, 2010). Mary Storm notes that the *Dasa Mahavidyas* originated from Sati's anger when her father, Daksha, humiliated her husband, Siva. The ten goddesses signify "transcendental knowledge" and represent "the dark night" (Storm, 2013, p. 287). These ten goddesses are Kali, symbolizing the eternal night and the "power of time", Tara, Sodasi, Bhuvanesvari, Chinnamasta, Bhairavi, Dhumavati, Bagata, Matangi, and Kamala (Storm, 2013, pp. 287-288). Storm notes that each of the goddesses is an equally important aspect of the divine feminine and has a cult after their name (Storm, 2013).

The Kamakhya temple is known for having individual shrines for each of the *Mahavidyas*, with temples named after Tara, Kali, Chinnamasta, Bhuvanesvari, Dhumavati, and Bhairavi, located on many levels near the main Kamakhya temple (Shin, 2010). Kamakhya is situated on a hilltop. In the *garbhagriha*, or the main section of the temple, lies the *yoni* (vagina) of the goddess, which is represented here as a 16-year-old *Kumari* (young) figure (Dold, 2004, p. 98). Kamakhya is also one of the major centers considered a shakti pitha, with the active presence of the goddess who undergoes

menstruation every year, a period known as *Ambubachi*. The festival is observed in the region for five days, during which the temples remain closed, and the menstrual blood is offered as a *prasad*[239] (Dold, 2004, p. 101). Kamakhya ritual practice is unique as it challenges the concept of purity traditionally associated with Brahmanical ways of worship, presenting practices that are more inclusive and liberal.

The *Mahavidyas* challenge the ideas of "purity and morality" (Dold, 2004, p. 92), present in orthodox Brahmanical practices, and defy the patriarchal standards of modesty and beauty. For instance, the figure of Tara and Kali depicted as naked figures standing on Siva, Chinnamasta is shown with a severed head, naked, and representing death herself (Dold, 2004, p. 92). Her skin color is varied as she is sometimes grey and sometimes red. Chinnamasta is called the "Night of heroism" (Storm, 2013, p. 288), who symbolizes both strength and 'sacrifice' (Storm, 2013, p. 288). Dhumavati's appearance is rare compared to the traditional goddess portrayal, which typically depicts a beautiful, fair, young, and voluptuous figure. Dhumavati is a dark-complexioned, old widow with "sagging breasts, she seeks quarrel and is always hungry and thirsty" (Le Pape, 2019, p. 40). The unpleasantness of Dhumavati's appearance confirm the traditional idea of beauty as an illusion (Le Pape, 2019). Kamala is the kind one among them who sits on a Lotus and is linked with the figure of Lakshmi (Dold, 2004). Sodasi like Kamala is also gentle. Her body resembles a "pure crystal" (Le Pape, 2019, p. 44), and her beauty embodies the "erotic" (Le Pape, 2019, p. 44) aspect of the divine feminine. The diverse imagery, grotesque appearance, and forms of the *Dasa Mahavidyas* stand in stark contrast to the upper-caste, monolithic, North Indian version of the goddess in Hindutva discourse. These figures negate the Hindutva framework not only in terms of casteist and elitist representations but also in terms of appearance, challenging the young, beautiful, voluptuous, fair-skinned version of goddesses in Hindutva. The *Mahavidyas* symbolize the regional versions of the divine feminine and reveal how incredibly complex the divine feminine is in reality.

[239] Prasadam or prasad is a food offering returned to the devotee after being sanctified by the deity.

Speaking about the regional goddesses, apart from *Mahavidyas*, many women mentioned Bonobibi, an indigenous goddess of Sundarbans, West Bengal. Madhabi said,

> *She's [Bonobibi] the goddess of the forest and the people in South 24 Parganas who live in the Sundarbans area; they worship her, and they feel that they will be saved from the dangers of the jungle if they worship her. (Madhabi Mondol, December 22, 2023)*

Pointing to the Bonobibi worship tradition in Sundarbans, West Bengal, Subha commented,

> *বনবিবি হচ্ছে সেই দেবী, যাঁর পূজা করে জেলেরা বা যাঁরা মাছ, কাঁকড়া ইত্যাদি ধরতে বনে যান, তাঁরা। আগে একে বনষষ্ঠী, বনচণ্ডী, বনদুর্গা বলা হতো। সেখান থেকেই হয়ে গেল বনবিবি। 'বিবি' শব্দটি তো মুসলম রা ব্যবহার করে, কিন্তু পূজা করছে হিন্দুরা, আর বলছে 'বনবিবি'। বনবিবির পূজাটা বেশ অদ্ভুত। কোনো পুরোহিত এই পূজা করে না। একদম তাঁরা নিজেরাই পূজা করে। এবং বনবিবির পাঁচালী পড়া হয়, ঠিক যেমন পীর বা লক্ষ্মীর পাঁচালী পড়া হয়। পাঁচালীর শেষে বনবিবি বলা হয়, তখন আল্লা কথা বলা হয়। তার সঙ্গে সঙ্গেই দক্ষিণরায়ের কথা বলা হয়, তখন বলা হয় 'হরি বোল হরি বোল'। বেশ মজার! দক্ষিণরায়ের সময় 'হরি বোল' আর বনবিবির সময় বলা হচ্ছে 'আল্লাহ আল্লাহ', এবং এই ক্ষেত্রে হিন্দুরাই বলছে। ভারী মজার! সুন্দরবনে যদি আসে, এই বনবিবি আর দক্ষিণরায়ের গল্প দেখবে এবং পূজা হয় মন্দিরের মধ্যে, যেখানে বনবিবি থাকে। বনবিবি বাঘের ওপর বসা, আর ওদিকে আবার সালোয়ার পরা। কী আশ্চর্য ধর্ম এবং religion and culture একটা মিশ্রণ হয়েছে, সেটা নিজে না দেখলে বিশ্বাস করতে পারবে না*[240]*. (Subha Chatterjee, December 29, 2023)*

Suhana emphasized the popularity of Bonobibi among the people of the Sundarbans. She said,

> *I went to the Sundarbans recently, not recently, a couple of years ago, and for a story that I had done on the health of women there and the absolute near-complete hold that Bonobibi has on even young girls there, that was quite something to see. And these are girls who are extremely capable of speaking on the phone. They have telephones with mobile phones, which they use for any and all purposes. But then again, while they speak, when they talk of things like floods, they will invoke Bonobibi. Although her role is limited to protecting people from tigers, they do speak of her as if she is a presence in their lives. So that's also sort of that's also something that I noticed. (Suhana Sengupta, March 29, 2024)*

Bonobibi is the goddess of the forest of Sundarbans, West Bengal, India. She is worshipped by Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and indigenous people living in the area. The primary function of the

[240] Here, Subha discusses the worship culture of Bonobibi, where both Muslims and Hindus honor her. There is no priest involved in the worship ritual. People chant her name. There is a Panchali or a sacred text attributed to the goddess. When the recitation of the Panchali completes, people start talking about Allah. Then the worshippers speak about DakhinRai, who is another god in the Sundarbans area. The goddess wears a salwar and sits on a tiger. She was previously known by different names like Bonocandi, Bonoshashti, and Bonodurga.

goddess is to protect the people from tiger attacks, natural disasters, or any other danger in the forest (Mandal & Halder, 2023, p. 34). Other than her, Dakhin Rai, or the tiger god, is also present. However, she is more popular among the local people as she is considered the mother of the forest (Mandal & Halder, 2023). The worship tradition surrounding Bonobibi differs from the Brahmanical Hindu worship ritual, as it does not involve a male Brahmin priest reciting verses dedicated to the goddess (Sen, 2024, p. 103). Offerings to the goddess mainly include hens and goats (Sen, 2024, p. 103). Arup Mandal and Santoshi Halder note that she is not an elite goddess figure, but rather a figure considered part of the local people's lives (Mandal & Halder, 2023; Karmakar, 2018). She is decorated not with gold but with wildflowers and mud (Mandal & Halder, 2023). Bonobibi is understood as a figure of unity, bringing people from all backgrounds together as part of her worship culture (Mandal & Halder, 2023). Bonobibi's worship has an underlying environmental aspect. The worship culture emphasizes sustainability and resilience among local people who live in an area known for climate calamities and animal attacks (Sen & Mukherjee, 2020). The sustainable approach includes respecting the forest and living peacefully by not carrying arms, not over-extracting forest resources, and prohibiting fishing during the breeding season (Sen & Mukherjee, 2020).

In addition to Bonobibi, many women participants also spoke about other local goddess figures, such as Manasa, Sitala, and Sasthi. Kumari detailed the characteristics of these local goddess figures, highlighting their 'subaltern' and non-Vedic origin. She stated,

> *Sorry, not to mention two very powerful goddesses worshipped in rural Bengal- Ma Manasa and Ma Sitala. Both of them protect defenceless people from dangers and distress. Ma Sasthi is also there to protect newborns and little children in a land where child mortality was very high. It's interesting to note that most of these divine protectors of rustic, impoverished people without sufficient means to survive were female gods. Ma Sasthi was ever benevolent and was/is worshiped on the 6th or 21st day after the birth of a child. Manasa is the one-eyed goddess of serpents. She protects people from snakes and is worshipped in the month of Sravana or rainy season, when chances of snake bites are more. Ma Sitala protects people from infectious diseases like cholera and small pox. While Sasthi and Manasa are worshipped in individual households, Sitala puja is a community affair. On the puja days, people do not light the unun or earthen oven in their homes as the Devi should be treated with everything 'sital' or cold.*

> *None of these Devis is a Vedic god, they have a subaltern origin and no less revered than the more established goddesses like Durga, Kali, Lakshmi, etc. (Kumari Dey, December 27, 2023)*

According to Saswati Sengupta (2020), Manasa, or the serpent goddess, is different from Sasthi and Lakshmi because she has only one *bratakatha* (ritual or religious stories), which is the *Manasa Mangal*[241], associated with her, which reflects her limited popularity among the masses. Sengupta notes the marginal status of the goddess Manasa, who is not worshipped by elite castes or upper classes, and there are a few temples dedicated to her. People from Brahmanical backgrounds generally do not worship or name their daughters after her (Sengupta, 2020, pp. 56-58). Despite this, Manasa has carved out her place among other caste groups, who worship her for protection from snake bites, with local shrines or places dedicated to the goddess. (Sengupta, 2020, p. 57).

Sasthi is associated with childbirth and motherhood, and despite her role aligning with many aspects of motherhood celebrated in the patriarchal system, she is a marginal goddess figure. We do not find temples named after her. She is also not very popular among upper-caste or class populations (Sengupta, 2020, pp. 186-188). She is worshipped more privately by women, grandmothers, and mothers who fast and pray to her for the well-being of their children (Sengupta, 2020). Among the figures above, Sitala is a popular deity and is known as "The Cool One" (Wadley, 1980, p. 33). If worshipped properly, she protects people from diseases and brings prosperity, but if she is unhappy, she causes disease, such as smallpox. She has a pan-Indian appeal with many regions having their own understanding of the goddess, but in Bengal, she is worshipped to protect against smallpox (Wadley, 1980, pp. 33-34). There is a cult named after the goddess Sitala in Bengal, with multiple Sitala temples built in villages across the region in her honor (Wadley, 1980, p. 34).

[241] *Manasamangal* is the earliest *Mangal Kavyas* and is dedicated to the goddess Manasa (Chakravarty, 2022, p. 55). See Chakravarty, S. (2022). Suppression and Resistance: Celebrating Manasa in Text, Performance and Ritual. In *The Goddess Re-discovered: Gender and Sexuality in Religious Texts of Medieval Bengal* (1st ed., pp. 55–71). Routledge India. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003310815-4 for more information.

Women's narratives bring out the rich and living presence of local goddess figures alongside the mainstream goddesses Durga, Kali, Saraswati, and Lakshmi. In some cases, these local figures are more part of people's daily lives than the mainstream goddess figures, as their importance is tied to caste identity, ethnicity, or the geography of the region. For instance, Pari, in her interview, mentioned not only Kali or Durga but also an active presence of the ancestral goddess Rajrajeswari and goddesses like Manasa and Itu[242]. She performs their puja like her family and sees these goddesses as part of her identity. Pari states that her mother and grandmother perform the Itu puja at her ancestral home, where they prepare everything beforehand. On the day of puja (worship), everything is served cold because it is part of the Itu worship ritual. They eat fish and all sorts of delicacies. Pointing to the indigenous goddess Itu and the rituals surrounding her, Pari expressed her love for the goddess Itu and why she is so special. She mentioned,

> *We worship Manasa. Another one, Itu Pujo, which happens in Poush Maash. And we do that as well. I do that because I love having that Ekush Pithe, which we made up, of the seasonal jaggery, palm jaggery, with fruits and ground rice. We mix that up and create that Ekush Pithe. So Itu comes with the blessing of having great children. I am, yeah. So that's, that's more like, it's not Sasthi because Sasthi is basically part of Durga. But Itu is not. Itu is more likely indigenous and mostly linked with the sun. You plant saplings of five cereals which are important for our nurturing: Turmeric, rice, wheat, and two others I can't recall today. These five seeds are planted, and on the last day of Agrahayan Maash, the main Itu puja takes place. By then, the plants have grown, and the daily watering nurtures them, symbolizing care that only a mother can provide. So, Itu is, again, indigenous, praying for the sun, for the betterment of your children, and practicing what Mother Earth does for us. (Pari Ghosh, July 16, 2024)*

The goddess Itu is connected to nature and conservation, similar to Bonobibi. The difference is that goddess Itu represents nourishment, while Bonobibi is also a protector of the forest. Suchismita Sen notes that Itu is a common worship culture among the Bengali Hindu women who perform the *vratas*[243] based on the months in the Bengali calendar, the *Kartik* month, which is October, and the *Agrahayan*

[242] Goddess Itu is a folk deity worshipped in Bengali households in West Bengal. She represents fertility and agriculture.
[243] Vrata or Brata means "rules of conduct" (Sen, 1995, p.70) as Sen describes. It can also mean a set of ritual practices performed for the goddess to gain the desired outcome. See Sen, S. (1995). The Tale of Itu: Structure of a Ritual Tale in Context. *Asian Folklore Studies*, *54*(1), 69–117. https://doi.org/10.2307/1178220 for more information.

month, which falls in November (Sen, 1995, p. 70). There is not much literature on the goddess Itu, even though the goddess is quite prominent in both urban and rural places of Bengal. Itu puja or worship does not require a Brahman priest, and all the rituals are performed by married Bengali women (Kolkatafusion, 2022)[244] . The women prepare the *Nabanna*, the offering comprising the fresh-harvested food (Kolkatafusion, 2022). Both Itu and Bonobibi worship are linked to the regional identities and cultures of their communities, which are not part of the mainstream. Although these regional figures may not be as well-known as Durga or Lakshmi, they are equally revered, remembered, and celebrated, and form a vital part of the lives of the women who believe in them.

The dominant representation of goddesses in Hindutva discourse erases the plurality and diversity in goddess worship culture and forms in India. The Hindutva framework of goddesses does not include regional figures like Manasa, Itu, or Bonobibi in the mainstream goddess narrative. The homogeneous lens of Hindutva, as mentioned previously in chapter 4, raises the question of whether goddess imagery has always been domesticated, patriarchal, and stereotypical, as it is under Hindu nationalism. However, the narratives of women and the active presence of multiple forms of goddesses in the lived experiences of women prove otherwise. It is a direct challenge and resistance to the homogenous, Brahmanical patriarchal notions of goddesses in Hindutva discourses. The narrative presents the plurality in goddess representations that are both empowering and transgressive in nature. The regional figures of Bonobibi, Itu, and Manasa convey an independent presence of regional goddesses who are equally important when it comes to the diversity of goddess worship traditions in India.

[244] See Kolkatafusion. (2022, December 14). *Itu Pujo, Nabanna and worshipping Sun - the goddess of fertility*. https://kolkatafusion.com/itu-pujo-nabanna-and-worshipping-sun-the-goddess-of-fertility/ for more information.

CONCLUSION

To summarize the diverse perceptions of the goddess that emerge from interviews with women, the goddess appears as a formless figure who cannot be limited to just a mother or a warrior. The narratives reveal the duality and paradox in the imagination of the goddess, portraying her both as a savior and as a demoness. These perceptions of goddesses differ significantly from the Hindutva framework of goddesses. Women's stories offer a way to understand the goddess's role in the current socio-political context, viewing the Hindutva framework from the standpoint of women whose voices are marginalized under Hindu nationalism. The narratives convey how goddesses are used in politics, in shaping Hindu identity, validating religious nationalism, and influencing concepts of citizenship and patriotism. The narratives also highlight the role of caste, class, gender, and ethnicity in Hindutva's conception of goddesses and how these intersecting identities shape models and perceptions for ordinary Hindu women in India.

Women spoke of empowering imagery of Hindu goddesses, which contradicts the dominant narratives of goddesses in the Hindutva discourse. They referred to qualities like power, assertiveness, autonomy, individuality, freedom, and liberation as key elements of empowerment in their view of goddesses. Their diverse, plural, and revolutionary interpretations of goddess imagery reflect a nuanced story of resistance, negotiation, and subversion of Brahminical patriarchy and Hindutva ideology. What is most interesting and revealing is the active presence of regional goddesses and the mention of *Dasa Mahavidyas* by women. These forms are what the Hindutva framework has failed to silence. They stand in direct opposition to Hindutva's portrayal of the goddess. These multiple forms tell a story of pluralism and polarity within goddess imagery and the diverse goddess worship traditions in India. These regional and plural forms of goddesses deserve recognition and celebration.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis is to examine goddess imagery in Hindutva representations, *Devi Mahatmya*, and the lived experiences of ordinary Hindu women to determine whether different types of goddess imagery reinforce stereotypical and patriarchal gender roles or empower women. My research on exploring the Hindu goddesses emerges against the backdrop of the political use of goddess iconography in the Hindu nationalist politics. As mentioned previously, Hindu nationalist leaders follow the Hindutva ideology that legitimises violence against non-Hindu communities and takes pleasure in marginalising the voices of both non-Hindu communities and women. The use of Hindu goddesses by mainstream Hindutva political groups and political parties, the BJP, creates an ideal Hindu womanhood image for women, both within and outside the Hindutva organizations. The incorporation of Hindu gods and goddesses in mainstream politics further fragments the Indian society, which is already divided on issues of caste, class, religion, and ethnicity. Through political appropriation of Hindu religious icons and mythical-historical figures like Ram, Shivaji, Sita, and Durga, the Hindutva political parties and organisations are creating a new language of nationalism and citizenship, rooted in the monolithic Hindu idea of the nation.

My project is not only an academic pursuit, but also aims to raise awareness about the use of religion and religious icons in shaping national identity, nationalism, patriotism, and citizenship through the analysis of goddesses in scripture, dominant political narratives, and in lived oral accounts of Hindu women. Hindu women's bodies are deeply affected by models of goddesses used by Hindutva politicians who weaponize religion to reinforce rigid models of Brahmanical patriarchy and Hindu womanhood. Through this research, I challenge the stereotypical and homogenous notion of goddesses in Hindutva discourse by highlighting the *Devi Mahatmya's* representations and voices of Hindu women whose narratives have long been neglected, yet whose bodies are visualized as upholders of the honour of the imagined Hindu nation.

In this concluding chapter, I tie together the analysis on goddesses in chapters 3 to 6, offering a diverse and complex understanding of the divine feminine representations in contemporary India. In this research, I undertook an in-depth analysis of goddess imagery through an intersectional feminist framework. I applied this framework in exploring the goddesses in classical textual literature, in political narratives by Hindu right-wing organisations, and in the lived realities of women whose voices are often not heard. The theme that binds the thesis together is the inquiry into the plurality of goddess representations in India, which is explained in the analysis chapters 4 to 6 that show how this plurality is evident in the *Devi Mahatmya* and in contemporary oral accounts of Hindu women. This very plurality undermines the singular Hindutva portrayal of goddesses, discussed in chapter 3.

The intersectional feminist framework has been central to my research in uncovering the interplay of caste, gender, class, ethnicity, religious identity, and regional diversity that shapes the varied goddess imaginings and their implications for women's empowerment, Brahmanical patriarchy, and gender norms. In this concluding chapter, I revisit the key findings presented in chapters 3 to 6, which address my primary research objective. Additionally, I discuss the contribution of my research to the existing scholarship, while also highlighting the limitations of my research. I conclude with a broader reflection on the relevance of Hindu goddesses in contemporary India.

SUMMARY OF THE KEY FINDINGS

My thesis critically examines goddess portrayal through an intersectional feminist lens across textual, symbolic, and lived accounts. In chapter 3 on Hindutva representations, I discussed how goddesses like Durga and Kali, as well as mythological figures like Sita, are selectively appropriated into categories of warrior and mother goddesses under Hindu nationalism. I argued that the dominant portrayal of goddesses in Hindutva discourse is a North Indian upper-caste, middle-class narrative of the goddess, which supports Brahmanical patriarchal norms. The websites of Hindu right organizations also show the cooptation of historical female figures, such as Rani Lakshmibai and Ahilyabai, as

models of Hindu womanhood. The goddesses, along with female historical and mythical figures, promote active, militant roles for women within the Hindutva movement, while also prioritizing women's traditional roles in the family and society at large. These figures symbolize different models of participation for women in Hindutva politics, whether as militant warriors, mothers, or celibates. All these models convey a sense of empowerment for women working in Hindutva organisations, claiming a space outside the traditional family roles. However, I explored in this chapter how this sense of empowerment is limiting, as it fails to challenge patriarchal and traditional gender roles both within Hindutva politics and in the larger society. The power ultimately resides with the men-run organizations of Hindutva, like the RSS and VHP, who decide the nature of women's participation in Hindu nationalist politics. Moreover, the emancipation and empowerment model set by Hindutva groups through their use of goddesses is only for the benefit of achieving the goal of the Hindu nation. Both Durga Vahini and the Samiti celebrate feminine power, but these organizations also simultaneously emphasize traditional Hindu womanhood roles that are grounded in Brahmanical patriarchal regulations.

In stark contrast to the dominant Hindutva narrative of goddesses, Chapter 4 reveals, through an intersectional feminist lens, the complex, paradoxical, ambiguous, plural, and conflicting portrayal of Hindu goddesses in the text *Devi Mahatmya*. The goddess stands out in the text as a supreme figure with unparalleled power and dominance over any other male deity. She enjoys complete autonomy in respect to her actions, body, sexuality, and requires no male gods to help her on the battlefield. The divine feminine in the text transcends, violates, and challenges the normative gender models typically associated with the ideal Hindu woman model. The goddess is a complex, multifaceted, and empowering figure who is at times ruthless and brutal. She enjoys supreme power over the cosmos and is more powerful than Vishnu. *Devi Mahatmya* presents Mahamaya and the Matrikas as transgressive figures who do not fit within the patriarchal framework of Hindutva. The goddess challenges patriarchy, blurring the boundaries of feminine and masculine roles. The text explicitly

presents the goddess as someone whose power is incomprehensible. She is the mother and the destroyer of the universe. She is the demoness and the saviour from the demons. The imagery of the goddess in the text is full of contradictions, conveying that there is no linear understanding of the divine feminine. Ultimately, through the Matrikas and various other forms like Candika, Kali, Camunda, the text explores the regional and non-Brahmanical aspects of the diverse manifestations of the goddess. The goddess imagery in the *Devi Mahatmya* resists the stereotypes and homogeneous lens of Hindutva discourse. While Hindutva nationalists tame and manipulate the idea of the goddess, DM offers a more layered and nuanced representation of the divine feminine.

Finally, the interviews with ordinary Hindu women, detailed in Chapters 5 and 6, reveal a complex, pluralistic, and regional understanding of the goddess, which is similar to the depiction in the *Devi Mahatmya*. For women, the goddess is a formless being who is worshipped and remembered in diverse ways. She cannot be confined to a strict category, such as mother or warrior goddess, pointing to a duality in the divine feminine who is both a savior and a demoness. Women's experiences of goddesses vary from the uniform representation of the goddess in the Hindu nationalist politics. Women expressed a detachment from traditional, orthodox ritual practices surrounding goddesses. They redefined worship with a focus on personal connection, meditation, interaction, and creating their personal ways of connecting with the goddess. This reimagined idea of worship allowed women to assert a sense of authority in how they chose to remember or interact with the goddesses, rather than adhering to traditional ways of worship where a Brahmin male priest performs the worship rituals.

Furthermore, the women I interviewed challenged the idea of Hindu womanhood, showcasing the diverse role models that shape their daily lives, including real-life figures, literary characters, and mythological figures. In some cases, their lack of awareness and mockery of the concept of ideal Hindu womanhood silences the Brahminical patriarchal view of Hindu womanhood and highlights the multiple meanings of womanhood. Women's stories highlighted regional goddess figures like Bonobibi, Sitala, and Manasa, underscoring regional, caste, class, and indigenous interpretations of

goddesses. The active presence of regional goddesses in the lives of ordinary Hindu women challenges Hindutva narratives, which portray a casteist, classist, and North Indian version of the divine feminine.

Women also defined empowerment as assertiveness, power, autonomy, and freedom. Their collective idea of empowerment is an effective form of resistance where women, through their ideas of goddesses and Hindu womanhood, challenge, question, and subvert the Brahmanical patriarchy and Hindutva ideology. The findings from the oral interviews with women show that resistance is not always a visible and extreme form of rebellion. However, it can also be expressed through subtle acts of negotiation, subversion, and reinterpretation, for instance, women retelling their personal imagination of goddesses or refusing to follow traditional rituals and roles in their daily lives. By redefining their engagement with goddesses and highlighting regional goddess forms, women offered a counter-hegemonic narrative of goddesses by subverting fundamentalist, orthodox, Brahmanical, and homogenizing lens of the Hindutva project.

INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST LENS

The intersectional feminist approach enabled me to critically examine goddess imagery in mainstream political contexts, in text and oral narratives of women. The intersectional feminist framework revealed how Brahmanical patriarchy and Hindutva ideology worked through dominant goddess imagery, impacting the lives of ordinary Hindu women. This framework is central to my research on goddesses, revealing how caste, class, ethnicity, region, religion, and gender intersect with goddesses to shape diverse perceptions of the divine feminine. The intersectional feminist lens revealed how Hindutva's homogenizing narrative of the goddess, which promotes a fair-skinned, upper-caste North Indian version, marginalizes regional and personal interpretations of goddesses, many of which include lower caste, regional-specific representations, like in the case of Bonobibi, Manasa, and various versions of Kali.

The variations in goddess forms, found in DM and oral stories of women, act as a counter-narrative to Hindutva's dominant, linear perspective on goddesses. The intersectional feminist framework in my research is a tool against Hindutva's hijacking of goddesses. The framework highlighted the voices and experiences of ordinary Hindu women whose stories of goddesses are shaped by intersecting identities across various social categories, offering a unique and multi-faceted understanding of goddesses.

CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP

My research directly addresses the gap in existing literature by providing a nuanced reading of goddess imagery through an intersectional feminist lens. The existing body of literature on *Devi Mahatmya* has not specifically analyzed the goddess representation in the text using an intersectional feminist understanding. The established literature on *Devi Mahtamya* did not contextualize the representation of goddesses in the text in relation to Hindutva's cooptation of goddesses, a crucial point that I addressed in my research.

Second, I offer a critical examination of Hindutva nationalists' appropriation of goddesses for political goals through a detailed analysis of the websites of Hindutva organisations, which previous scholars have not undertaken. Third, I highlight and prioritize women's lived experiences of goddesses, whose perspectives on goddess imagery have been largely unexplored and not properly represented in mainstream politics. I bring a grassroots perspective on the goddess in my research by centering on the perspectives of women from West Bengal, a region known for its unique and rich history of goddess worship traditions.

Fourth, by applying an intersectional feminist framework, I offer a qualitatively different lens to understand how Brahmanical patriarchy operates through the goddess imagery within the context of Hindu nationalist politics. My research focuses on three distinct spheres: Hindutva politics, the *Devi Mahatmya*, and narratives of women, aiming to understand how the imagery of goddesses can be

empowering to women or used to reinforce patriarchy. Finally, my study provides an intersectional understanding of women's empowerment and resistance through my analysis of women's accounts of goddesses who redefine worship, resist notions of Hindu womanhood, and discuss regional goddesses.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The most significant limitation of my research is securing a sufficient number of women participants from the lower castes and classes residing in rural areas of West Bengal. As I used Zoom to conduct in-depth interviews, this method requires an internet connection or access to Wi-Fi. However, many women from economically lower classes and low-caste groups did not have access to internet services or own personal laptops or computers. Even if they visited internet cafes, the centers lacked the privacy needed to discuss interview topics with the participants. Although I included participants from lower castes who are economically stable and reside in the metropolitan city of Kolkata and its adjoining areas, this does not mean I successfully overcame all challenges in representing specific demographics. The time constraint was also a challenge, and as a PhD student, I did not have the financial resources to travel to India to conduct in-depth interviews. Nevertheless, despite technical limitations, I conducted interviews with 30 ordinary Hindu women from West Bengal, representing a diverse range of backgrounds, including teachers, professors, journalists, researchers, social activists, educators, and spiritual healers.

Based on the varied representations of the goddess in texts and oral histories of women, my research reveals that the imagery of the goddess is far from the linear imagination of goddesses in Hindutva discourse. The goddesses are powerful ideological tools, and are utilized by Hindutva groups to control women's bodies and sexuality through the Brahmanical patriarchal depiction of goddesses. However, the goddess imagery can also be used as a way of subversion of gendered models, orthodox Brahmanical practices, and Hindutva ideology, as evident in *Devi Mahatmya* and women's narratives.

Many women, while speaking about their perception of goddesses, critiqued the BJP and Hindutva groups' use and misuse of goddess imagery. One of them pointed to the culture of censorship in India under the BJP government in connection with the recent backlash against the film *Kali.* The Toronto-based filmmaker from India, Leena Manimekalai, faced death threats for her portrayal of Kali holding the Pride flag with a cigarette in her mouth in her film *Kali,* screened at the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto. The backlash came from Hindutva and BJP supporters, including religious leaders (Xing, CBC, July 14, 2022)[245]. In relation to that, Suhana said,

> *It became a huge thing and, and it continued to be a huge thing. It was almost as if this issue was necessary for a batch of people to continue to be relevant, as is often the case. So yeah, yeah. Her film Kali was a big deal. It became a big deal, and these stray references in films have also become a big deal, especially in OTT platforms, because not too many people would go to a hall to watch a film, take in whatever is happening, but they would be able to see it online. And so recently, there was this, as in we've come to know that the government exerts a lot of power over what gets screened over platforms like Amazon Prime and Netflix. And its bosses have sort of bowed to the government of India in a way that sort of removes these references to Hindu goddesses and gods, and is not critical of Hindu lines of thinking at all. So, I'm guessing that this would limit all the ways in which we can see the ideas of religion, and specifically relevant at that, I mean maybe even gods and goddesses. (Suhana Sengupta, March 29, 2024)*

Others raised concern about the use of religion by Hindutva political parties that is dividing India along communal lines, as Madhu Haldar opined,

> *Because the thing of politics, politics and religion nowadays, it's very messed up. You know because politics is all about play with the religious communities nowadays, I think, you know, living in India, we see lots of things, including the Ram Mandir [Ram temple] to masjid[246][mosque], the biggest binary has been Hindu Muslim. So, it's on the, beyond male and female. It's on the Hindu- Muslim now. (Madhu Haldar, June 29, 2024)*

[245] See Xing, L. (2022, July 14). Toronto filmmaker receives backlash, death threats over Hindu goddess poster. *CBC News*. https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/leena-manimekalai-kaali-film-poster-hindu-right-1.6519758 for more information.

[246] Here, Madhu refers to the Ram Janmabhoomi movement led by Hindu nationalist groups to demolish the Babri mosque and build a Ram temple in its place in Ayodhya, India.

The narratives of women emphasized the need to acknowledge the plurality and diversity in worship traditions and the personal interpretations of goddesses, especially during recent times when Hindutva ideology, promoted and supported by the ruling BJP government, is homogenizing the understanding of goddesses, Hindu religion, culture, and identity.

APPENDIX 1: LETTER OF INFORMATION

Letter of Information for Interview

My name is Sohini Ganguly. I am a PhD student under the supervision of Prof. Lori G. Beaman at the Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies at the University of Ottawa, Canada.

What kind of research do I want to do?

The research will examine the imagery of the goddesses like Durga and Kali in 6th century Sanskrit text Devi Mahatmya, Hindu nationalist discourse and explore how the narratives of goddesses are integrated in the lives of ordinary Hindu women in West Bengal. The study seeks to analyse oral narratives of the ordinary Hindu women to see how they relate to goddesses concerning their social roles and everyday lives. The analysis will be nuanced by exploring the imageries of goddesses in the relevant 6th century Sanskrit text, Devi Mahatmya, and how a comparative analysis of the imageries of goddesses present in Devi Mahatmya may show differences or continuities in Hindu Nationalism's narrative of the goddess.

The objective of the research is:

To examine goddess imagery in these three- Devi Mahatmya, oral accounts of ordinary Hindu women, Hindu nationalism's representations to discover whether/to what extent various types of goddess imagery can reinforce stereotypical and patriarchal gender roles or empower women. The study aims to show the plurality in the understanding of goddesses that varies from the stereotypical and domesticated imageries of goddesses presented by Hindu nationalism.

A component of the research deals with oral accounts of ordinary Hindu women to see how goddesses are embedded in the contemporary narratives of ordinary women. The study aims to explore the alternative and multiple ways in which goddesses are remembered or interpreted by Hindu women.

What does taking part in the research involve?

Participation involves online interviews with 30 ordinary Hindu women from West Bengal above the age of 18. The participants will be recruited based on the requirements of the research. The duration of online interview will be approximately 60 to 90 minutes each and will be conducted using video conferencing technology, Zoom (https://zoom.us/). The interview will take place on the time based on the convenience of the participants and their preference. There will be no honorarium for participation in the interview. The audio and video of the interview will be recorded. Video recording of the interview will be securely deleted following the interview. During the interview, the participants will respond to questions related to goddesses and their perception of goddesses. This will be a single interview with no follow up. During the interview, notes will

be taken. The participant can request that the recording and/or the interview stop at any point during the interview process. The participant may also end the participation in the study at any point and request that all data related to the participant be destroyed. Participants are under no obligation to participate, and they can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without fear of reprisal.

What assistance do I require?

Participants will be recruited by the principal investigator. Researcher will request potential and existing participants to share the contact details of the researcher with interested participants. The interested participants can contact the researcher through her University of Ottawa email address or phone.

What will happen to the information that participants provide?

The identity of the participants will remain strictly confidential and interview transcripts will be anonymized by using a pseudonym instead of the participants real names. Only the principal investigator will have access to the identifying information. The anonymized data will be used solely for the purposes of this research project and related conference presentations and publications. All data will be securely deleted after five years of retention period.

The results of the study will be made available to participants in an appropriate format and will hopefully be useful to participants to reflect on their understanding of goddesses and better understanding of their relationship with goddesses. The study will contribute to the scholarly understanding of whether/to what extent various types of goddess imagery can reinforce stereotypical and patriarchal gender roles or empower women.

How can you volunteer to participate?

If the participant wants to volunteer for the study, they can contact me via my University of Ottawa student email address

APPENDIX II BENGALI CONSENT FORM

অনুমতি ফরম

অধ্যয়নের শিরোনাম: দেবীর প্রতিচ্ছবি: দেবী মাহাত্ম্য, হিন্দু জাতীয়তাবাদ এবং পশ্চিমবঙ্গ, ভারত থেকে নারীর আখ্যান

অধ্যয়নের উদ্দেশ্য: ডক্টরাল থিসিস

প্রধান তদন্তকারীর নাম: সোহিনী গাঙ্গুলী

অ্যাফিলিয়েশন: ইনস্টিটিউট অফ ফেমিনিস্ট অ্যান্ড জেন্ডার স্টাডিজ, সামাজিক বিজ্ঞান অনুষদ, অটওয়া বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়

ইমেল ঠিকানা:

সুপারভাইজারের নাম: প্রফেসর লরি জি. বিম্যান

অ্যাফিলিয়েশন: ক্লাসিক এবং ধর্মীয় অধ্যয়ন বিভাগ, কলা অনুষদ, অটোয়া বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়

ইমেল ঠিকানা:

অংশগ্রহণের আমন্ত্রণ: আমি অধ্যাপক লরি জি. বিমনের তত্ত্বাবধানে সোহিনী গাঙ্গুলী দ্বারা পরিচালিত "দেবীর প্রতিমা: দেবী মাহাত্ম্য, হিন্দু জাতীয়তাবাদ এবং পশ্চিমবঙ্গ, ভারত থেকে নারীর আখ্যান" গবেষণা অধ্যয়নে অংশগ্রহণের জন্য আমন্ত্রিত।

অধ্যয়নের উদ্দেশ্য: অধ্যয়নের উদ্দেশ্য হল দেবী মাহাত্ম্যের দেবী চিত্রকল্প, পশ্চিমবঙ্গের সাধারণ হিন্দু মহিলাদের মৌখিক বিবরণ, হিন্দু জাতীয়তাবাদের উপস্থাপনাগুলি আবিষ্কার করা যে/কী পরিমাণে দেবী চিত্রকল্প বিভিন্ন ধরণের স্টিরিওটাইপিক্যাল এবং পিতৃতান্ত্রিক লিঙ্গ ভূমিকাকে শক্তিশালী করতে পারে বা মহিলাদের ক্ষমতায়ন করতে পারে। অধ্যয়নের একটি উপাদান পশ্চিমবঙ্গের সাধারণ হিন্দু মহিলাদের মৌখিক বিবরণ নিয়ে কাজ করে যাতে দেখা যায় কীভাবে সাধারণ মহিলাদের সমসাময়িক আখ্যানগুলিতে দেবী অনুবিদ্ধ করা হয়েছে। গবেষণাটি পশ্চিমবঙ্গের সাধারণ হিন্দু মহিলাদের মৌখিক বর্ণনা বিশ্লেষণ করে দেখতে চায় যে তারা কীভাবে তাদের সামাজিক ভূমিকা এবং দৈনন্দিন জীবনের সাথে দেবীর সাথে সম্পর্কযুক্ত। অধ্যয়নের লক্ষ্য হল বিকল্প এবং একাধিক উপায় অন্বেষণ করা যাতে সাধারণ হিন্দু মহিলারা দেবীকে স্মরণ করে বা ব্যাখ্যা করে।

অংশগ্রহণ: গবেষণায় আমার অংশগ্রহণের মধ্যে থাকবে গবেষকের সাথে একটি সাক্ষাত্কার নিয়ে প্রশ্নগুলির উত্তর দেওয়া এবং প্রায় 60 থেকে 90 মিনিটের জন্য আলোচনায় অংশগ্রহণ করা। আমার সাক্ষাত্কারটি ভিডিও কনফারেন্সিং প্রযুক্তি, জুম (https://zoom.us/) এ পরিচালিত হবে। আমার সাক্ষাৎকারের অডিও ও ভিডিও রেকর্ড করা হবে। সাক্ষাৎকারের পর আমার সাক্ষাৎকারের ভিডিও রেকর্ডিং নিরাপদে মুছে ফেলা হবে। সাক্ষাৎকারের সময়, আমাকে দেবী, দেবী পূজা এবং দেবী সম্পর্কে আমার উপলব্ধি সম্পর্কিত প্রশ্ন করা হবে। এটি কোন ফলো আপ ছাড়াই একটি একক সাক্ষাৎকার হবে। সাক্ষাৎকারের সময় হাতে লেখা নোট নেওয়া হবে। সাক্ষাৎকারটি আমার জন্য সুবিধাজনক সময়ে অনুষ্ঠিত হবে। আমি অনুরোধ করতে পারি যে সাক্ষাত্কার প্রক্রিয়া চলাকালীন যেকোন সময়ে রেকর্ডিং এবং/অথবা সাক্ষাত্কার বন্ধ করে দেওয়া হোক। আমি যেকোনো সময়ে অধ্যয়নে আমার অংশগ্রহণ শেষ করতে পারি এবং আমার সাথে সম্পর্কিত সমস্ত ডেটা ধ্বংস করার অনুরোধ করতে পারি। সাক্ষাৎকারে অংশগ্রহণের জন্য কোন সম্মানী ভাতা থাকবে না।

ঝুঁকি: এই অধ্যয়নে আমার অংশগ্রহণ সাক্ষাত্কারের জন্য প্রয়োজনীয় সময় বাদ দিয়ে কোন ঝুঁকি বা অস্বস্তি সৃষ্টি করবে না, যা ঘটলে আমার জন্য সুবিধাজনক সাক্ষাত্কারের জন্য সময় বেছে নেওয়ার মাধ্যমে হ্রাস করা হবে। সাক্ষাত্কারের সময় আমি যদি অস্বস্তি অনুভব করি, আমি এটি পুনরায় নির্ধারণ করতে পারি, একটি বিরতি নিতে পারি বা সাক্ষাৎকার থেকে আমার অংশগ্রহণ প্রত্যাহার করতে পারি। একটি অনলাইন সাক্ষাত্কারে অংশগ্রহণ করার মাধ্যমে, আমার চারপাশের কেউ আমার সাক্ষাত্কার শুনতে পারে। সুতরাং, এটি গুরুত্বপূর্ণ যে আমি এমন একটি জায়গায় ইন্টারভিউয়ের জন্য ভালভাবে পরিকল্পনা করি যা আমাকে সর্বাধিক গোপনীয়তা প্রদান করে।

উপকারিতা: অধ্যয়নে আমার অংশগ্রহণ আমাকে দেবী সম্পর্কে আমার নিজের অভিজ্ঞতার প্রতিফলন করতে এবং দেবদেবীদের সাথে আমার সম্পর্ক সম্পর্কে আরও ভালভাবে বুঝতে সাহায্য করবে। আমার সাক্ষাত্কারটি একটি ডেটা সেটের একটি অংশ হবে যা একটি পাণ্ডিত্যপূর্ণ

গবেষণার জন্য অবদান রাখবে যে/কী পরিমাণে বিভিন্ন ধরণের দেবী চিত্রকল্প স্টিরিওটাইপিক্যাল এবং পিতৃতান্ত্রিক লিঙ্গ ভূমিকাকে শক্তিশালী করতে পারে বা মহিলাদের ক্ষমতায়ন করতে পারে। গবেষণা প্রকল্পটি সম্পূর্ণ হলে অধ্যয়নের ফলাফল একটি উপযুক্ত বিন্যাসে অংশগ্রহণকারীদের কাছে উপলব্ধ করা হবে।

গোপনীয়তা এবং পরিচয় গোপন রাখা: আমার পরিচয় কঠোরভাবে গোপন থাকবে এবং সাক্ষাৎকারের প্রতিলিপি আমার আসল নামের পরিবর্তে একটি ছদ্মনাম ব্যবহার করে বেনামী করা হবে। শুধুমাত্র গবেষক আমার সনাক্তকরণ তথ্য অ্যাক্সেস করতে পারবেন | আমি বুঝি যে বেনামী ডেটা শুধুমাত্র এই গবেষণা প্রকল্পের উদ্দেশ্যে এবং সম্পর্কিত কনফারেন্স উপস্থাপনা এবং প্রকাশনাগুলির জন্য ব্যবহার করা হবে।

ডেটা সংরক্ষণ: আমি বুঝি যে সম্মতি ফর্ম, ট্রান্সক্রিপ্ট এবং অডিও রেকর্ডিং, হাতে লেখা নোট সহ সংগৃহীত সমস্ত ডেটা একটি পাসওয়ার্ড সুরক্ষিত ল্যাপটপ এবং ইউএসবি-তে একটি সুরক্ষিত উপায়ে সংরক্ষণ করা হবে যা গবেষকের অন্তর্গত পাঁচ বছরের জন্য। হাতে লেখা নোটগুলি গবেষকের অন্তর্গত একটি লক করা ক্যাবিনেটে নিরাপদে সংরক্ষণ করা হবে। প্রধান তদন্তকারী এবং সুপারভাইজার ডেটাতে অ্যাক্সেস পাবেন। পাঁচ বছর পরে সমস্ত ডেটা সম্পূর্ণ নিরাপদ পদ্ধতিতে মুছে ফেলা হবে।

স্বেচ্ছায় অংশগ্রহণ: সোহিনী গাঙ্গুলী, ইনস্টিটিউট অফ ফেমিনিস্ট অ্যান্ড জেন্ডার স্টাডিজ, ইউনিভার্সিটি অফ অটোয়া, কানাডার দ্বারা পরিচালিত উপরে-উল্লেখিত অধ্যয়নে অংশগ্রহণ করার জন্য আমার কোনো বাধ্যবাধকতা নেই। যদি আমি অংশগ্রহণ করতে পছন্দ করি, আমি যেকোনো সময় অধ্যয়ন থেকে প্রত্যাহার করতে পারি এবং/অথবা কোনো প্রশ্নের উত্তর দিতে অস্বীকার করতে পারি, কোনো নেতিবাচক ফলাফল ভোগ না করে। যদি আমি প্রত্যাহার করতে পছন্দ করি, প্রত্যাহারের সময় পর্যন্ত সংগ্রহ করা সমস্ত ডেটা ডেটা সেট থেকে সরানো হবে এবং গবেষণায় ব্যবহার করা হবে না।

গ্রহণযোগ্যতা: আমি, (*অংশগ্রহণকারীর নাম*), প্রফেসর লরি জি. বিম্যানের তত্ত্বাবধানে অটোয়া বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ের ইনস্টিটিউট অফ ফেমিনিস্ট অ্যান্ড জেন্ডার স্টাডিজের সোহিনী গাঙ্গুলী দ্বারা পরিচালিত উপরে-উল্লেখিত গবেষণায় অংশগ্রহণ করতে সম্মত।

আমি এই সাক্ষাৎকারের অডিও এবং ভিডিও রেকর্ডিং করতে সম্মতি দিচ্ছি। সাক্ষাৎকারের পরে ভিডিও রেকর্ডিং নিরাপদে মুছে ফেলা হবে।

- হ্যাঁ
- না

আমি যেকোন সময় গবেষককে গবেষণার প্রক্রিয়া, ফলাফল এবং আমার অংশগ্রহণ সহ অধ্যয়ন সম্পর্কে ব্যাখ্যা চাইতে পারি। আমি উপরের ইমেলে গবেষক বা তার তত্ত্বাবধায়কের সাথে যোগাযোগ করতে পারি।

এই অধ্যয়নের নৈতিক আচরণ সম্পর্কে আমার কোন প্রশ্ন থাকলে, আমি ইমেল (ethics@uottawa.ca) বা টেলিফোন (613-562-5387) এর মাধ্যমে রিসার্চ এথিক্স অ্যান্ড ইন্টিগ্রিটির অফিসের সাথে যোগাযোগ করতে পারি।

আমার রেকর্ডের জন্য এই সম্মতি ফর্মের একটি অনুলিপি (রাখা/মুদ্রণ/সংরক্ষণ) করার পরামর্শ দেওয়া হচ্ছে।

আমার কাছে মৌখিক বা লিখিত সম্মতি দেওয়ার বিকল্প আছে। মৌখিক সম্মতি জুমের উপর নথিভুক্ত করা হবে, এবং এই ইলেকট্রনিক সম্মতি ফর্মে স্বাক্ষর করার মাধ্যমে লিখিত সম্মতি নথিভুক্ত করা হবে।

নীচে আমার নাম স্বাক্ষর করে, আমি এই গবেষণা অধ্যয়নে অংশগ্রহণ করতে সম্মত:

অংশগ্রহণকারীর স্বাক্ষর: _____ তারিখ: _____

গবেষক স্বাক্ষর: _____ তারিখ: _____

APPENDIX III ENGLISH CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

Title of the Study: Imagery of Goddesses: Devi Mahatmya, Hindu Nationalism and Women's narratives from West Bengal, India

Purpose of study: Doctoral thesis

Name of Principal Investigator: Sohini Ganguly

Affiliation: Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ottawa

Email address:

Name of Supervisor: Prof. Lori G. Beaman

Affiliation: Department of Classics and Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Ottawa

Email address:

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the research study "Imagery of Goddesses: Devi Mahatmya, Hindu Nationalism and Women's narratives from West Bengal, India", conducted by Sohini Ganguly, under the supervision of Prof. Lori G. Beaman.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to explore goddess portrayal in Devi Mahatmya, oral accounts of ordinary Hindu women in West Bengal and Hindu nationalism's representations to discover whether/to what extent various types of goddess imagery can reinforce stereotypical and patriarchal gender roles or empower women. A component of the study deals with oral accounts of ordinary Hindu women in West Bengal to see how goddesses

are embedded in the contemporary narratives of ordinary women. The study seeks to analyse oral narratives of the Hindu women to see how they relate to goddesses concerning their social roles and everyday lives. The study aims to explore the alternative and multiple ways in which goddesses are remembered or interpreted by Hindu women.

Participation: My participation in the study will consist of having an interview with the researcher by responding to questions and engaging in discussion for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. My interview will be conducted on video conferencing technology, Zoom (https://zoom.us/). The audio and video of my interview will be recorded. Video recording of my interview will be securely deleted following the interview. During the interview, I will be asked questions related to goddesses, goddess worship and my perception of goddesses. This will be a single interview with no follow up. During the interview hand written notes will be taken. The interview will take place at the time convenient for me. I may request that the recording and/or the interview stop at any point during the interview process. I may also end my participation in the study at any point and request that all data related to me be destroyed. There will be no honorarium for participation in the interview.

Risks: My participation in this study will not entail any risks or discomfort aside from the time necessary for the interview, which will be minimised by the choice of time for the interview that is convenient for me, should they occur. If I experience discomfort during the interview, I can reschedule it, take a pause or withdraw my participation from the interview. By participating in an online interview, someone around me can overhear my interview. So, it is important that I plan well for the interview in a place that provides me with maximum of privacy.

Benefits: My participation in the study will help me to reflect on my own experiences of goddesses and better understanding of my relationship with goddesses. My interview will be a part of a data set that will contribute to a scholarly understanding of whether/to what extent various types of goddess imagery can reinforce stereotypical and patriarchal gender roles or empower women. The results of the study will be made available to participants in an appropriate format when the research project is complete.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I understand that my identity will remain strictly confidential and interview transcripts will be anonymized by using a pseudonym instead of my real name. Only the researcher will have access to my identifying information. I understand that the anonymized data will be used solely for the purposes of this research project and related conference presentations and publications.

Conservation of data: I understand that all the data collected, including consent forms, transcripts and audio recordings, hand written notes will be stored in a secure manner on a password protected laptop and USB that belongs to the researcher for a period of five years. The hand written notes will be securely stored in a locked cabinet that belongs to the researcher. The principal investigator and the supervisor will have access to the data. After five years all data will be completely deleted in a secure manner.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate in the above-mentioned study conducted by Sohini Ganguly, Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies, University of Ottawa, Canada. If I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be removed from the data set and not used in the study.

Acceptance: I, (*Name of the participant*), agree to participate in the above-mentioned study conducted by Sohini Ganguly of the Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies, University for Ottawa, under the supervision of Prof. Lori G. Beaman.

I consent to Audio and Video recording this interview. Video recording will be securely deleted following the interview.

o Yes

o No

I may ask the researcher for clarification about the study, including the research process, results and my participation, at any time. I may contact the researcher or her supervisor at the email above.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity via email (ethics@uottawa.ca) or telephone (613-562-5387).

It is recommended that I (keep/print/save) a copy of this consent form for my records.

I have the option of providing verbal or written consent. Verbal consent will be documented over Zoom, and written consent will be documented through signing this electronic consent form.

By signing my name below, I agree to participate in this research study:

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX IV: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

The semi-structured, Zoom interview will cover the following themes: (1) Introductory Information; (2) Goddess Perception; (3) Basic demographic Questions. Sample questions and prompts are given below. There can be questions that will be asked during the interview that may vary based on the response of the participants. PI may ask additional questions which is not listed below in response to the insights that participants will provide during the interview. Interviews are expected to last for approximately 60 to 90 minutes each.

(1) Introductory questions:

Can you tell me a bit about yourself? What
do you do?
Where do you live? Where
you grew up?
Tell me a bit about your education, your hobbies, your current work?

(2) Goddess perception:

Do goddesses or any particular goddess play a role in your life?
What role they play in your life?
What prompted your decision to worship this particular goddess?

Tell me a bit about the history of the goddess in your family? Was
worshipping this goddess a personal choice?

Can you tell me a little about what the goddess means to you in your everyday life? Would you give an example in a way that the goddess plays role in your daily life (like personal relationship, navigating social roles)?

Do you perform rituals or other kinds of practices around the goddess? How often would you do that?

Who are your female role models?

Who inspires you?

Is there any goddess who is your role model? Who is the ideal Hindu woman?

What role do you think goddess play in political life or mainstream politics?

How do you imagine goddess? What do you think of when you think of the goddess?

(3) Basic demographic questions: Name

Age:

Location:

Religion:

Marital status: Single, Married, Divorced, Other

Educational qualifications:

Work experience:

Income:

APPENDIX V: CODING SCHEME

MAIN CODES	Description
Family history of goddess worship	Stories, worship histories, culture, society, region, place, family, worship rituals
Personal experience, personal belief and understanding of goddess	Women's interpretation of goddesses, lived experiences, personal choice of worshipping or following goddesses, following or not following goddesses
Goddess as empowering	Goddess as power, resistance, strength, energy, liberating and empowering figure, transgressive forms of goddesses outside Brahmanical patriarchy, gender norms
Inclusive and regional goddesses	Caste, class, gender, region and ethnicity in goddess imagery, local or folk deities, regional figures, multiple version or forms and emotions of goddesses
Goddess in mainstream politics	Goddess role in politics, Hindutva, society, religion and politics, democracy, nation and nationalism
Rituals	Ritualistic traditions around goddesses, criticism of Brahmanical rituals, purity and impurity concepts, caste and gender hierarchical norms in rituals, women's own rituals or worship around goddess
Ideal Hindu womanhood	Caste, class, gender aspect in ideals of Hindu womanhood, rejection or submission to idea of Hindutva's Hindu womanhood concept
Real-life idols or goddesses as idols	Goddess as role models, real life role models. Ideal models of womanhood if any.
Demographics	Age, marital status, job, religion, income

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