The Hindu Goddess and Women’s Political Representation
in South Asia:
Symbolic Resource or Feminine Mystique?
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The under-representation of women in political institutions is a quasi-universal phenomenon, notwithstanding the glaring exception of Scandinavian countries. Comparative studies seem to be, for this reason, particularly required, to distinguish actually universal factors for women’s political under-representation, from more culturally specific ones. The universal factors identified so far include the dominant sexual division of labor, in which women are in charge of the domestic work (including the care of children); the domination of political parties by men; and electoral systems with single-member constituencies. A recent comparative study of women representatives in France and the United Kingdom offers a more cultural explanation. The author of the study, J.Freedman, makes the hypothesis that the “fundamental factor for the exclusion of women from the political field [is] a political culture which does not offer women any positive model of female power”; and indeed she concludes from her survey that the “non-coincidence between the signs of power and those of femininity” is the main obstacle to an important presence of women in the political institutions of these countries.

As a French observer of women’s political representation in South Asia, I was particularly interested in J.Freedman’s work. Her observations drew me to question the impact, if any, of the Hindu Goddess – a uniquely popular, positive figure of feminine power - on the political representation of women in two countries where Hinduism is the religion of the majority: India and Nepal.

To speak of “the Goddess” is actually misleading: the Hindu pantheon includes a number of female deities, who are conventionally divided into two main categories: benign goddesses and fierce goddesses, respectively characterized by a set of features such as their character, appearance, mobility, kinship, residence, worshippers, priest etc. But the deity referred to as “The Goddess” is most often either Kali or Durga, who both are without consorts and embody absolute Shakti, i.e. the cosmic, feminine principle of power.
The Hindu Goddess has been, in the last twenty years, the object of much interest in various circles, both in India and in the West. Ecofeminism and New Age spirituality have invoked her as a source of inspiration. But “is the Hindu Goddess a feminist?” asked R. Sunder Rajan. Such a question points to the relationship between a cultural artifact, defined as essentially feminine, and real women. My intention here is to examine, more specifically, the relationship between the Goddess and those women who engage with politics. Does the Goddess provide a symbolic resource to women’s political activism? Or is she the central figure of a Hindu “feminine mystique”, i.e. a dominant definition of femininity which stands in the way of women’s empowerment?

In this paper, I propose to locate the evidence of associations of women’s political participation, in the largest sense of the term, with the Hindu Goddess, over the last century, in India and Nepal. This will allow me to identify the contexts in which the Goddess seems to be effective; the functions she then performs; the manipulations she undergoes; and lastly her value for women’s political empowerment.

I. The political avatars of the Goddess in India

The role of the Goddess in Indian political life has been fairly well documented, as it is associated to two themes which have generated a number of researches: women’s participation in the anti-colonial movement (from the 1880s to 1947); and the political career of Indira Gandhi. I will rely on these researches, as well as on the renewed interest of indology for the Goddess, in order to sketch her successive incarnations and functions, before and after independence.

Bharatmata, Sita and the mobilization of women into the Freedom movement

The first political participation of Indian women as a group coincides with the symbolic representation of the Indian nation as a beloved, suffering, deified mother: Bharatmata, i.e. “Mother India”, a character created by the nationalist Bengali writer Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in a novel published in 1882, Anandmath. Bharatmata starts her political career, one might say, when the partition of Bengal ordered by the British in 1904 - ostensibly for administrative purposes - gives way to the first mass agitation of Indian nationalism: the Swadeshi ("one’s own country") movement
(1904-1907), advocating the promotion of indigenous productions and national schools freed from the control of the colonizer. Women then participate for the first time in political agitations, demonstrate in the streets, organize big boycotts for imported textiles etc. Bharatmata then comes to embody India, both as a territory and as a people, struggling for her freedom; while *Vande Mataram* ("Hail, O Mother"), a hymn to the motherland also found in *Anandmath*, becomes the anthem of the nationalist movement. Thus real women find a place for themselves within the anti-colonial struggle at the very moment when the Goddess becomes the omnipresent representation of the nationalist cause.

Bharatmata has much in common with Durga, as her iconography shows. Like Durga, she rides a lion (or a tiger), and she has the same matronly, smiling face. Durga in fact is the most popular of all incarnations of the militant mother-goddess. In India she is mostly worshipped as *Mahisasuramardini* ("killer of Mahisasura") during the autumn festival of Dussehra - also called Durga Puja in Bengal, where it is the most important of all Hindu annual festivals. Durga is then represented as a ten-armed woman warrior, brandishing her weapons, riding her lion, and vanquishing the demon-buffalo Mahisasura. This image refers to a well-known mythical event related in the *Devi Mahatmya* ("Praise of the Goddess"), a text dating back to the VIIth century AD, which is being read or recitated as an essential component of Durga Puja. The *Devi Mahatmya* relates how the gods, helpless in front of a formidable demon, Mahisasura, who could be vanquished only by a woman, created Durga, who then indeed slayed him.

Bharatmata is a favorite theme of Indian nationalism; a theme illustrated on banners and flags, as well as by artists such as Abanindranath Tagore and Amrita Sher-Gill. From 1930 onwards she is represented as a woman whose body defines the frontiers of the subcontinent, and she definitely becomes, in the words of S.Ramaswamy, “the fetish object of Indian nationalism”. As such, she moves, appeals to, in short mobilizes, in the fullest sense of the term, both women and men.

But two leaders, in the Indian Freedom movement, designed mobilization strategies specifically aimed at women. The Mahatma Gandhi on the one hand, and Subhas Chandra Bose - a prominent Bengali leader of the Indian National Congress – on the other hand, were deeply concerned with women’s participation in the nationalist struggle. Both were convinced that a new India could be born only with
women’s full contribution, and both invented new political roles for them\textsuperscript{10}, invoking the Goddess as an example for Indian women.

S.C. Bose explicitly incited women to emulate Durga and come to the rescue of the struggling nation. In 1930, for instance, he toured Bengal, declaring that,

“...women had not only duties to their family, but they had also a greater duty to their country. When the gods found their silver almost vanquished in their fight with the demons, they invoked the help of ‘sakti’ in the form of mother. The country was in a sad plight, therefore the country looked up to the mothers to come forward and inspire the whole nation.”\textsuperscript{11}

Gandhi, most often, referred to another female deity: Sita. This epitome of wifely virtue, the chaste, dutiful spouse of the god Ram in the Ramayana (the most popular epic in north India), was invoked by the Mahatma as an example for women. Gandhi was convinced that the participation of women was necessary for India to gain its independence. His political method, relying on non-violence and the highly symbolic value of activities such as spinning, was meant to involve women fully into the nationalist struggle\textsuperscript{12}. Gandhi often drew explicit parallels, in his addresses to women, between Sita’s legendary fight against the demon Ravana, and Indian women’s fight against the British.

In the context of the nationalist struggle, the Goddess thus appears to fulfill one crucial function for any mass movement: that of mobilization. Bharatmata is a representation of the nation that deeply touches men and women, because of her striking resemblance with the most popular image of Durga, and because of her emotive appeal as a suffering mother. Sita, on the other hand, is a popular deity called upon by Gandhi mostly for women’s use. Sita, the beloved heroine of the Ramayana, is here deliberately construed as a role model for women to engage in the nationalist movement.

The mobilization effected by the reference to the Goddess draws upon two distinct, if combined, processes. Firstly, the ongoing struggle is recast in terms which are familiar to the masses. Durga (through Bharatmata) and Sita lend their popularity to the nationalist cause, conferring upon her an emotional appeal.

Secondly, the invocation of the Goddess translates a political endeavor into a religious mission. The ongoing struggle is then endowed with a sacred dimension,
simplifying the fight as one of good against evil. The invocation of Sita, which casts, by analogy, the British colonizer into the role of the demon, shows this very clearly.

As a result of these two processes, and this is particularly important as far as women are concerned, the invocation of the Goddess *legitimizes* people’s participation in the movement. The translation of political activism into religious terms transforms its very nature: engagement with politics, hitherto synonymous with the public sphere, and thus the preserve of men, can then be construed as performance of one’s religious duty, which is opened to women as well\textsuperscript{15}. The translation operated through the invocation of the Goddess thus prevents potential role conflicts for women. They can then walk in the streets, mix with strangers, even with men who are not family members, without losing their respectability\textsuperscript{14}. They can engage in a traditionally masculine activity without threat to their femininity.

**Durga, Kali and the legitimization of women leaders**

In independent India, the Goddess seems to be associated exclusively to individual women, that is, to women leaders\textsuperscript{15}. Foremost among them, of course, is Indira Gandhi, an exceptionally powerful and enduring woman politician.

The daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru became the Prime Minister of a country of 500 million people at the age of forty-eight, in 1966; she remained at the head of the Indian government until 1977, and then again from 1980 till her death, in 1984. She was associated to the Goddess in two crucial moments of her political career: after India’s military intervention against Pakistan in 1971; and after the declaration of the internal state of Emergency in 1975.

After the Indian army’s successful intervention in East Pakistan, which later became Bangladesh, Indira Gandhi was widely represented, on calendars and chromos, as Durga. This was the highest point of her popularity, the moment in her career when her dynastic charisma became a personal one. She then appeared as the champion of democracy, both soldierly and motherly, just like Durga Mahisasuramardini.

Five years down the line, her popularity had greatly diminished. Her government was facing a number of economic and political problems, and she was personally accused of favoring corruption through excessive concentration of power. After being accused of electoral fraud, in June 1975, she refused to surrender to what
she considered as the “forces of disintegration”\(^\text{16}\): she declared a state of Emergency, jailed her opponents, cancelled elections, put a ban on demonstrations, and, for the first time in the history of the Indian democracy, censored the media. She was then, once again, compared to the Goddess. The famous painter M.F.Hussain offered her a triptych in oil, which “represents her as Durga or Kali, the goddess of death and also of renewal, riding bloodily across India”\(^\text{17}\).

This interpretation of the painting by Mrs. Gandhi’s biographer, the poet Dom Moraes, highlights the degree of criticism that could be conveyed by the reference to the Goddess. The righteous Durga, triumphant on slaying the demon, has indeed another face, that of the more ambiguous Kali, the “Black one”, a figure of fury and destruction – although Kali, too, ultimately fights evil. In the *Devi Mahatmya*, Kali is born from Durga’s frown; she seems to embody Durga’s furor, surging when Durga loses control or when she faces an awesome enemy. Kali generally threatens stability and order\(^\text{18}\); yet for her worshippers, Kali is also the divine mother, full of compassion. Despite her fearful appearance, Kali, the most important of Hinduism’s “fierce” goddesses, is widely worshipped in most of north India, particularly in Bengal, where she is the object of the shakta cult.

Because of this inherent ambiguity, the reference to the Goddess could express criticism and yet evade censorship, as in this article published in October 1975, pleading for a restoration of democracy, under the title “Sakti or Woman Power”:

“There is today a great demonstration of woman power in India. Some people believe that, astride on her lion, the Goddess Durga is riding again in our midst. But all are not agreed about who the demons are that she should destroy. Also, most of us wish that the Devi will send her awesome form and appear again as the loving Ambika or the Mother Goddess.”\(^\text{19}\)

Lastly, even Indira Gandhi seemed to identify herself with Durga. In late 1976, while she started having misgivings about the Emergency, she confided to J.Krishnamurti, a spiritual leader: “I am riding on the back of a tiger…I do not mind the tiger killing me, but I do not know how to get off its back.”\(^\text{20}\) In this metaphor she clearly evoked the warrior-goddess, powerful but also dangerous, when unleashed.

What function does the reference to the Goddess perform in Indira Gandhi’s political career? This reference is clearly ambivalent: it always emphasizes the power of the Prime Minister, but this can be righteous triumph as well as misguided tyranny;
which explains why the reference is made both by the leader’s admirers and by her critics. The Goddess, being an essentially feminine figure of power, in both its positive and negative dimensions, seems here to pre-empt any conflict between the leader’s gender and her extraordinary power; or, to use the words of the sociopsychologist Ashis Nandy, between “public success” and “private womanliness”.  

This conflict in fact is at the root of women’s long alienation from the public sphere in the West. Carol Pateman has shown how, “in the patriarchal construction of the difference between masculinity and femininity, women lack the capacities necessary for political life”. More precisely, she writes,

“In popular […] consciousness the duality of female and male often serves to encapsulate or represent the series […] of liberal separations and oppositions: female, or – nature, personal, emotional, love, private, intuition, morality, ascription, particular, subjection; male, or – culture, political, reason, justice, public, philosophy, power, achievement, universal, freedom.”

The conception of femininity as being incompatible with power is bluntly expressed by the Pakistani general Yahya Khan, Indira Gandhi’s main enemy in 1971, who declared that “Mrs.Gandhi is neither a woman nor a head of state by wanting to be both at once.”

Does the Hindu cosmology, in which the Mother-Goddess stands for both nature and power, provide a counter-model to the liberal construction of femininity and masculinity? According to Ashis Nandy,

“…in India, competition, aggression, power, activism and intrusiveness are not so clearly associated with masculinity. In fact, in mythology and folklore, from which norms often come for traditionally undefined social situations, many of these qualities are as frequently associated with women […] That is why in some areas of life, disjunctive with the traditional life style and not having clearly defined or well-developed norms, women do not start with as great a handicap as they do in many other societies.”

The Goddess thus appears to perform a function of legitimization of the woman politician as a leader in her own right. The representation of the leader as the Goddess contributes to “diffuse in the whole society an image of the relationship [between the leader and the people] as beneficial, valued and in conformity with dominant beliefs.” Whether she is represented as Durga or Kali, i.e. the reassuring or the threatening face of Shakti, the woman leader is uncontested as Shakti; those critics
who refer to her as Kali actually criticize the use to which she puts her power; they do not question her authority.

More recently, another important Indian female politician has been regularly associated with the Goddess: Jayalalitha Jayaram, who was the Chief Minister of the southern state of Tamil Nadu between 1991 and 1996. Jayalalitha was first known as a popular actress, through a series of films in which she invariably played the adoring heroine, assiduously wooing Tamil Nadu’s favorite hero, played by the actor Madanapally Gopala Ramachandran, or MGR. In Tamil Nadu, cinema has long been a “cultural springboard of politics”. MGR built a successful political career on his popularity as an actor, and was the Chief Minister of the State from 1977 to his death in 1987. Jayalalitha, however, had to build her political career not upon her fame as an actress, but against it. MSS Pandian has shown how she systematically undertook to destroy her former image as a free, amorous woman: she pretended that her mother had forced her to be an actress; and at the same time she positioned herself as the true political heiress of MGR – who was her lover not only on the screen, but also in real life.

Jayalalitha started representing herself as a Goddess during the electoral campaign of 1991: alleging that she had been assaulted within the State’s Assembly by members of the rival party, she referred to this incident presenting herself as Draupadi, the famous heroine of the Mahabharata. This other great Indian epic narrates the battle between the five Pandavas brothers along with their wife Draupadi, and their cousins, the Kauravas. A famous episode shows the Pandavas losing all their possessions to the Kauravas during a game of dice, until they even lose their wife. The eldest of the Kauravas then decides to humiliate Draupadi by divesting her of her sari. But thanks to some divine intervention, Draupadi’s sari proves to be endless, and she is spared the humiliation.

Here again, the metaphor used by the woman politician casts her in the role of the pure – and ultimately triumphant – heroine, and her political opponents in that of the villains. After the victory of her party, Jayalalitha became Chief Minister and unleashed a personality cult which manifested itself through her representation as a variety of goddesses – including non-Hindu ones. During Christmas of 1994, for instance, she appeared as the Virgin Mary on huge, wooden cut-outs all over Madras.
In 1998, to celebrate her party’s 25th anniversary, she was portrayed as Kali, wearing a garland of skulls, depicting M.Karunanidhi, the leader of the rival party.

All these representations, unlike in the case of Indira Gandhi, are directly produced by Jayalalitha and by her party. The material supports of these images are those of electoral paraphernalia – posters, banners, paintings on the walls, cut-outs. These visual metaphors clearly are part of a deliberate political communication. According to Pandian, by representing herself as the Goddess, Jayalalitha actually puts herself on a superhuman plane, freeing herself from the usual norms of female behavior.

She thus escapes the stigma of her past avatar as an actress, which is synonymous with lax mores; of her adulterous relationship with MGR; and of her present unconventional way of life (she lived, until recently, with a woman friend).

Yet other women, in the last decade, have gained access to some of the highest positions on the Indian political scene. Mayawati – a Scheduled Caste, i.e. untouchable woman - was, for a brief period, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh; so was Sushma Swaraj in the Capital region of Delhi; Rabri Devi has been Bihar’s Chief Minister since the past three years; and the leader of the Opposition at the Centre today is Sonia Gandhi. None of them have used the Goddess in their political communication. They are, however, regularly compared to goddesses by the Indian media.

When Sushma Swaraj, an eminent personality of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was nominated as the Chief Minister of Delhi in 1998, a leading political magazine called her a “modern Sita”, even though she is far from being a submissive wife. When the coalition government led by the BJP lost a confidence motion, in April 1999, a political commentator assigned this defeat to three women party leaders – Jayalalitha, Sonia Gandhi and Mayawati -comparing them respectively to Laxmi (the goddess of wealth), Saraswati (the goddess of knowledge) and Durga. The justification for this choice is not very clear. While comparing Jayalalitha to Laxmi might be an allusion to the scandals in which she has been involved for accumulating enormous wealth during her tenure as Chief Minister, the association of S.Gandhi with Saraswati and that of Mayawati with Durga does not evoke any particular aspect of these leaders’ personality or action.

What is the impact, if any, of this recurring journalistic metaphor? The media are an essential component of women’s image and visibility on the political stage. On
the one hand, the reference to women politicians as goddesses singles them out, on the basis of their gender, among politicians as a whole. The metaphor makes them more visible, and it prevents the banalization of women’s leadership: if any woman leader has to be a goddess, it means that this is a role unfit for normal, human females. On the other hand the very repetition of the metaphor converts it into a cliché which loses the impact of its real implication and becomes a conventional figure of speech.

In Indian politics over the last century, then, the Hindu Goddess has performed a function of mobilization for groups – males as well as females – and a function of legitimization for individuals, more particularly for those female leaders who identified themselves with her. Is this the case in Nepal as well?

II. In Nepal: Durga, the King and Democracy

The political history of the small Himalayan kingdom of Nepal in the twentieth century is very different, if often dependent, from that of its big neighbor. There was no colonization in Nepal, even though a British Resident, representing the Empire, was permanently posted in Kathmandu after Nepal’s defeat in its war against Great Britain (1814-1816). The kingdom was actually kept in deliberate isolation from the rest of the world from 1856 onward by the Rana dynasty, who occupied the position of Prime Minister in a hereditary fashion. Democracy was restored only in 1951, when the democrat forces, allied with King Tribhuvan (whose family had been maintained in a purely symbolic function), overthrew the Rana rule. Ten years later, however, the son of Tribhuvan, King Mahendra, staged a coup in his turn, and established the so-called “panchayat system”, which actually was an absolute monarchy. The only mass movement in the country’s history, the so called Jana Andolan (“People’s Movement”) brought back democracy in 1990. The history of people’s political participation at the national level is thus a short one, comprised between 1951 and 1960, and then between 1990 and today. In between these two periods, in fact, political parties did continue their activities, but on a very modest scale, since they were officially banned.

Yet two important facts ground this comparison with India. Firstly, Nepal is a Hindu kingdom, the only one of its kind, and Durga is the central Goddess of tantrism, a form of Hinduism prevalent in the Kathmandu Valley. Secondly, most Nepalese political cadres have been formed in India both before the Freedom movement and
during the Panchayat system; they have imported ideologies and party structures from India; one can wonder if they have also imported the political use of the goddess.

What evidence, then, do we find in the recent political history of the country, of the Goddess’ political use?

**The conspicuous absence of the Goddess in the Nepalese democracy**

The 1990 “Movement for the Restoration of Democracy”, led by an alliance between seven communist parties and the Nepali Congress, was the only mass movement in the history of the country. Indeed when the Rana regime was overthrown in 1951, this was the work of a small number of exiled democrats, benefiting from the support of the King and from the help of India. One of the major effects of the national isolation imposed by the Rana was the non-development of a middle-class who could have supported such a political endeavor. Evidence exists, however, of the active participation of some women at that time; but these were mostly the close relatives of democrat leaders, and they were usually confined to the “women’s sections” of the clandestine political parties created between the 1930s and the 1950s.

The first mobilization of women as a group thus occurred in the spring of 1990. Women’s large participation in the movement was actually one of its most remarkable features. Moreover, the leader of the communist coalition, called the United Left Front, was a woman: Sahana Pradhan, the widow of Pushpa Lal Shrestha, who was the founder of the first Nepalese communist party.

In 1990, women joined mixed demonstrations, organized demonstrations of their own, and were mobilized in a variety of inventive, significant ways. They would, for instance, march on the streets with the copper pots in which they traditionally carry the water; in another place, they would carry with them the metal plates in which they serve meals; in yet another demonstration, they would carry their babies. Mobilizations of these kinds were most often initiated by the women’s section of the main communist party. They obviously intended to convey a specific meaning: that women, as housewives – i.e., in a conservative social context, as women – were demanding the restoration of democracy.

Other symbolic actions specifically carried out by women included the performance of the Swasthani vrata (“Swasthani’s vow”) which is a very popular Hindu ritual, performed uniquely by women, in order to ensure the stability of their
homes. In the spring of 1990, this ritual was invested with a new meaning: all over the Valley, groups of women gathered to perform “vratas for democracy” in sacred places associated to power.

These examples show the importance paid to the symbolic dimension of people’s, and more specifically women’s, mobilization. Like in India, the choice of “props” synonymous with womanhood, or of ritual acts which are traditionally performed by women, manifest the will to translate politics for women’s use, and at the same time, to harness women’s social role in favor of the political cause at stake. Unlike in the Indian Freedom movement, however, the Hindu Goddess was remarkably absent from the whole Movement for the Restoration of Democracy.

What about individual female politicians? Very few women have reached important political positions since 1951. Sahana Pradhan and Shailaja Acharya (a member of the Koirala family, whose involvement in Nepalese democratic politics dates back to the 1920s) might be the only women leaders in Nepal today. Both of them have held important positions in their party, and relatively important portfolios in the government, but neither seems likely to ever become Prime Minister. Neither of them, nor any other woman politician, since 1951, have used the Goddess’ image in their political communication.

How can we explain this conspicuous absence of the Goddess?

A possible obstacle to the instrumentalisation of the Goddess by democratic forces could be that of ideological incompatibility: does the important role played by communist parties in the Democratic movement explain the Goddess’ absence from it? This is unlikely, for “all Nepalese political ideologies acknowledge, with varying degrees, that religion has some social virtues.”

Another potential explanation might be that of the local incarnations of the Goddess, which do not allow easy identification for real women. The Goddess has two main faces in Nepal: the Kumari and Durga. On the one hand the Kumari, a little girl chosen to embody the Goddess for a few years (until her puberty), is the living image of Durga. The Kumari is not a woman, she’s a little girl, and a very un-childlike little girl; she is a most unlikely role-model for women. On the other hand, Durga as she is represented in statues and paintings, doesn’t exhibit any of the conventional attributes of femininity; she is a fearful warrior, concerned only with war. As such, she is celebrated during Dasain, the Nepalese equivalent of the Durga Puja festival. The
rituals enacted for Dasain actually provide the answer to the question of the political uses of the Goddess in Nepal

**Durga’s alliance with the King**

Only men are concerned with Dasain, which explicitly excludes women. This contrasts with Bengal, where Durga Puja celebrates not only the slayer of the demon, but also the married daughter’s return to her parents’ home for a few days; the wide representation of Durga as a smiling matron, notwithstanding her armed arms, is evidence of this dual aspect. The Nepalese Durga, on the other hand, is a bloodthirsty warrior, who is sometimes symbolically represented only by a sword.

But even more significant than her fearful appearance, is her explicit alliance with the King. The anthropologist V. Bouillier sums up thus the different meanings, and the different roles, of Durga in the Himalayan kingdom:

“What does the Goddess worshipped at Dasain represent? Above all she is Shakti – Power. This power is firstly that of nature, of creation and of the forces of fertility; Dasain is also the celebration of plentiness, of vegetation, of harvest, which is manifested by the association of the Goddess with barley shoots and with plants bearing fruits […] Commanding prosperity and, as such, being Sri, the King’s consort, the Goddess celebrated during Dasain is associated to the King in yet another capacity. For she is Durga, the triumphant One […] A goddess who protects the King, she has become […] the King’s shakti, the source and the personification of his power. The celebration of the Goddess becomes that of the conquering, divinely legitimated power of the King […]”

The Goddess, indeed, is omnipresent in all the rituals asserting the King’s legitimacy. Dasain is a ten day festival, divided between the first nine nights, called the Navaratra, and the tenth, climactic day. The first nine days are devoted to the goddesses who compose the group of the Navadurga (“the nine Durga”); while the tenth day, which is that of Durga Mahisasuramardini, is “more specifically centered on war and on the king”.

“All the goddesses who manifest themselves during Dasai are either warrior divinities, or divinities closely associated to the royal power […] These female deities are […] all mobilized by the king for the survival of his kingdom and for the upholding of his power.”
Moreover, each year, the Kumari puts a tika, i.e. a red, auspicious mark, on the forehead of the king, a gesture which signifies that she, the Goddess, protects his legitimacy over the kingdom.

The Goddess does, therefore, constitute a formidable symbolic resource – but a resource for the exclusive use of the King, that is, of the traditional order. As such she was unusable by the democratic forces who contested precisely this traditional order.

III. The Hindu Goddess: a versatile, limited, undemocratic, ambiguous political resource

The comparison of the political uses of the Goddess in the political life of India and Nepal now allow me to qualify her value as a symbolic resource for women’s political representation.

A versatile resource

Firstly, the Goddess is indeniably a symbolic resource in the political life of these two countries. Even though it might prove difficult to measure her real impact on people’s minds, her prominence in the symbolism of the Indian nationalist movement, her instrumentalisation by leaders such as Indira Gandhi and Jayalalitha, and her omnipresence in the rituals connected with the legitimacy of the King in Nepal, all testify to her political efficacy.

The very diversity of the situations mentioned here points to the versatility of this resource, which is tapped by mass movements as well as by individual leaders, and by revolutionary forces as well as by a conservative ruling order. This versatility also shows that the Goddess per se does not constitute a resource for women’s political activity. The essential femaleness of the Goddess does not prevent her close association to a male ruler, nor her efficiency in mobilizing men.

Moreover the comparison of India with Nepal highlights, on the one hand, the construction of the Goddess, in India, as the emblematic figure of the struggling nation; and on the other hand, the specificity of the Nepalese democratic movement, which had to fight, from 1960 onwards, the very symbol of national unity – the king. As such, the comparison underlines the importance of the identity narrative in India, as well as its utter absence in Nepal. These two facts point at the specific
circumstances which can account for the major symbolic role played by the Hindu Goddess in the Indian Freedom movement.

The great political destiny of Bharatmata owes much to the fact that the cradle of the Indian freedom movement was Bengal, a region characterized by its tradition of Shakta cult. What A.Nandy calls the “matrifocal” character of the Hindu cosmology is indeed particularly developed in Bengal.

“…The dominant image of authority in the peasant cosmology of Bengal has always been feminine. It was that of a mother goddess who was the original or basic power, Adyashakti, and the ultimate principle of nature and activity, Prakriti. The personification of this principle was Chandi, the traditional goddess of the region. Though apparently associated only with the Shakti cult, a cult in turn associated with the elite castes in Bengal, the mother goddess constituted the basic irreducible elements in the Bengali cosmology.”

Because the nationalist struggle became a mass movement in Bengal, with the Swadeshi movement, the Goddess was more likely to play a political role.

But a more important factor, perhaps, was the anti-colonial dimension of the Freedom movement. In order to assert the existence of India as such, and its legitimate right to self-government, the movement needed symbols expressing the identity of the nation. As J.Bagchi writes,

“By representing the country as a Hindu mother/goddess the nationalist culture helped to inject a significant order into the struggle to rejoin what is intimately and unmistakably one’s own.”

The construction of the Hindu Goddess, a local cultural artifact, into an emblem of the struggling nation, the personification of the Indian territory, the “fetish object of Indian nationalism”, thus constitutes an example of the invention of tradition often found in decolonization contexts.

**A residual resource for women politicians**

Even if the Goddess has been associated (beyond the journalistic metaphor) only to two women politicians, its very use, once again, proves that she does constitute a symbolic resource. One must, however, put the importance of this resource in perspective.

Firstly, the figures concerning the overall political representation of women in India suggest that the goddess does not generally play a significant role. Even if a
number of women have reached some of the highest political positions in the last
decade – and significantly only half of them fall into the category of “political
heiresses” - the composition of the Indian Parliament as well as that of state
assemblies over the past 50 years show that women’s electoral representation in India
is actually lower than the average for developing countries\textsuperscript{40}.

Secondly, the two women leaders in whose career the Goddess seems to have
played some role actually could rely on a set of other, more important political
resources. On the one hand, Indira Gandhi’s foremost political resource was the
dynastic legitimacy that still is in force in India, and which made her acceptable as a
Prime Minister in spite of her youth and her relative political inexperience. On the
other hand, Jayalalitha’s larger than life persona owes much to her former avatar as a
cinema actress, and to her association with MGR, in a state where popular actors are
literally worshipped – even though, as I said, she did not cash in on the characters she
impersonated as an actress.

A resource at odds with democracy

The India-Nepal comparison seems to illustrate part of the Weberian
distinction between different types of legitimacy. The Goddess appears to be both the
instrument and the expression of either a traditional type of legitimacy – as in the
Nepalese monarchy; or of a charismatic type of legitimacy – as that of Indira Gandhi
and Jayalalitha.

In Nepal, where the 1990 democratic movement has ushered in a constitutional
monarchy, the King is now largely relegated to a purely symbolic function, that of
representative of the national unity. The rituals such as those performed during
Dasain, asserting his legitimacy as the ruler of the kingdom, express a traditional,
sanctified order, which has no relevance in today’s political configuration other than
that of providing a sense of continuity between the different episodes of Nepal’s
political history.

The clear association of the Goddess with a traditional type of legitimacy in
Nepal points at the charismatic character of the legitimacy of both Indira Gandhi and
Jayalalitha at those times when they use the Goddess in their political communication.
In both cases the reference to the Goddess occurs when a personality cult is being
developed by the leader and/or her party. In the case of Indira Gandhi, this starts with
her victory over Pakistan, and culminates under the Emergency with the slogan “Indira is India, India is Indira”; in the case of Jayalalitha, the personality cult is encouraged as soon as 1991, and has continued since then.

In both cases the leader, through her identification with the Goddess, is put on a super-human, extraordinary plane; as such she escapes the usual difficulties of political life, ranging from character assassination to political criticism, and to the loss of political power. Charismatic legitimacy is thus, at the very least, problematic in a democratic context.

The political use of the Hindu Goddess can indeed appear as an indicator of the evolution of political legitimacy in the countries studied here. The authoritarian, extremely personified aspects of the leadership of Indira Gandhi and Jayalalitha can be interpreted as traces of a pre-democratic organization of power in India. This puts a strong limit on the political usefulness of the Goddess for women at large: if the Goddess’ political efficacy implies a legitimacy of either the traditional or the charismatic type, this means that she cannot, generally, be relied upon as a resource in a democratic context.

**A resource which protects social consensus**

What are the social consequences, for women as a group, of the political use of the Goddess?

On the one hand we have seen that the reference to the Goddess in the Indian Freedom movement allowed women a real transgression of the ordinary limits to female behavior; but on the other hand the prominence, at the symbolic level, of a Hindu deity during this founding episode of contemporary India, reasserted the pregrence of religion in social life - and religion is the main source of social norms concerning women.

Moreover the Goddess referred to was always a (supreme) mother, even when she was a militant mother. Her instrumentalisation in the Freedom movement probably reinforced the social legitimization of women through motherhood only.

Lastly, as I have said, the reference to the Goddess in connection with women leaders prevents the banalization of women’s leadership by placing them on a super-human plane. These leaders thus cannot serve as role-models for other women.
The Goddess, therefore, even while she legitimizes the participation of women in a traditionally male field, does not question the sexual division of labor beyond the exceptional circumstances in which she is invoked. As such she also is a resource for the dominant social consensus.

**Conclusion**

This rapid incursion, on the trail of the Goddess, into the political life of India and Nepal, suggests two conclusions: firstly, the Goddess seems to be both a symbolic resource which can be used by women in a political context, and the pillar of a Hindu “feminine mystique”. Secondly, her varying uses have a heuristic virtue as far as the political contexts in which they occur are concerned.

The Hindu Goddess is indeed a symbolic resource in the political life of India and Nepal. But her versatility as such points to her ambivalence as far as women are concerned. On the one hand, the evidence mentioned above suggests that her instrumentalisation in a political context can empower women insofar as it legitimizes them either as participants to a mass movement, or as leaders in their own right. On the other hand, this instrumentalisation is evidently restricted to exceptional times, and to exceptional people. One must have noted that the Goddess is brought on the political stage only in times of crisis, big or small: civil disobedience; war; Emergency; electoral campaign; political change of guard. The transgression permitted by the reference to the Goddess does not persist once a more normal situation is back. The Goddess, clearly, does not support a questioning of the sexual division of labor, and in that sense she is not, ultimately, a feminist, to answer R.Sunder Rajan’s question.

Rather, she seems to be the most visible expression of a Hindu feminine mystique, in every sense of the term: both the intense worship, by men as well as women, of a female deity; and the social glorification of motherhood, which does not prevent the perpetuation of gender-based discriminations in access to food, health and education.41

There is, obviously, no homology between the Hindu Goddess and Hindu women, between the symbolic and the social level. Yet unlike Marianne, the very feminine emblem of the French Republic, Durga cannot be said to be the “symbolic sublimation of an actual exclusion” [M.Agulhon] – that of women from the political
field. Rather, the Goddess seems to provide a bridge between femininity and power, a bridge whose use is restricted to a few individuals and to specific circumstances, but a bridge nevertheless.

Lastly, the Goddess proves to be a rich pointer to the political contexts in which she happen to play a role. Her incarnations, her attributes, her alliances point to the discursive construction of a collective identity; to the social composition of political movements, and to the types of legitimacy at stake.

1 R.E.Matland undertook such a classification of factors, starting from the fact that “independent variables found to be significant in previous research in advanced industrialized democracies fall into three categories: political/electoral institutions, cultural variables, and socio-economic variables.” (R.E.Matland, “Women’s Representation in National Legislatures: Developed and Developing Countries”, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, vol.23, #1, February 1998, p. 111).


3 Ibid., p. 283.


5 I have adopted here the most common, anglicized spelling of words such as “Shakti” or “Dasain”; alternative spellings, based on transliteration, will appear sometimes in the quotations from other authors, more particularly from anthropologists.


10 Bose ultimately parted ways with Gandhi, to choose a violent path towards India’s independence. With the help of the Japanese, he went to Singapore and created the Indian National Army, mostly composed of former Indian war prisoners, an army which included, for the first time, a women’s regiment, named after the Rani (“Queen”) of Jhansi, the legendary ruler of the kingdom of Gwalior, who took the arms during the 1857 uprising against the British in order to protect her kingdom so that her son could inherit it.


13 This legitimization of women’s participation in the anti-colonial struggle through the expression of the political in religious terms is reinforced by the wide perception of Gandhi as a saint, as T.Sarkar has shown (T.Sarkar, “Bengali Women in Politics – the 1920s and 1930s”, in K.Sangari and S.Vaid (Eds.), *Women and Culture*, Bombay, Research Centre for Women’s Studies, 1985, p. 120.)

14 That women were concerned with their respectability appears for instance in their careful choice of clothes, and in their preference for the white sari, synonymous with purity (See G.Forbes, “The Politics of Respectability: Indian Women and the Indian National Congress”, in D.A.Low (Ed.), *The Indian National Congress. Centenary Hindsight*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1988)

15 I am dealing here only with mainstream politics. But one must note that the Goddess has been associated with the mobilization of women as a group in two other contexts in the last fifty years: the


23 Ibid., p.124.

24 Le Figaro (1971), quoted in P.Gupte, Mother India – A Political Biography of Indira Gandhi.

25 A.Nandy, op.cit., p. 42.


27 Tamil Nadu is one of the three states that produce the most films in India.


31 The Times of India, 18/04/1999.

32 The panchayats, in Nepal as in India, were traditionally small councils in charge of the community, which could be the village or the caste. The “panchayat system”, also called “partyless democracy”, officially relied on three tiers of elected assemblies – at the village, district and national level – but the restrictions imposed on the candidates to elections emptied the system of any democratic dimension.


38 A.Nandy, op.cit., p.8.


40 While in 1994 the average proportion of women in the Parliaments of developing countries was 11% (M.ul Haq, Human Development in South Asia 1997, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997, p.21), in India women constituted only 7% of representatives at the Union level, and 4%, on average, at the states’ level (Source: CSDS data Unit).

41 See the latest Human Development Report.

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