

## India: Depicting divinity

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In 1975, two films that went on to become mega-hits, Sholay and Deewar, were released. What stumped critics was the runaway success of another movie released the same year - Jai Santoshi Maa. The film, based on a vrat katha - a story narrated during a religious fast - that had become popular in North India in the 1960s, expanded on the basic pamphlets on a relatively unknown deity. Thanks to director Vijay Sharma and Anita Guha, the actress who played Santoshi Maa, the film earned cult status drawing crowds who conflated the identities of the character and the actress. Anita Guha quietly passed away earlier this week, ironically at a time when there is a ruckus about humans being depicted as gods - women depicted as goddesses, to be precise.

Unlike the late Anita Guha, neither Sonia Gandhi nor Vasundhara Raje is an actress. Thus, Ms Gandhi and Ms Raje don't seem to have the licence that a performer has to portray established deities. In the case of Ms Gandhi, some of her supporters have displayed posters of her as Goddess Durga (something the Congress Party has expressed strong disapproval of) while some of Ms Raje's supporters have shown their leader as Goddess Annapurna.

Visual representation of political leaders as deities is nothing new. But in an overwhelming number of cases, the leaders being depicted are given the paraphernalia of divinity - thus making them gods, rather than associating them directly with any existing gods. This seems to have been what has upset a few: the depictions of political leaders not as towering personalities in their own right (which would be perfectly all right, ask the supporters of Jayalalithaa, for instance) but as Durga and Annapurna.

Culturally, however, even this is not a blasphemous act in Hinduism. Durga idols in Calcutta, for instance, have for decades used the face of a favourite cinema star (Hema Malini,

Aishwarya Rai, etc) as Durga's. There may have been aesthetic debates about this practice but certainly not cultural or religious ones. But politicians are a different lot when it comes to 'photoshopping' their faces on to deities. Trying to usurp religious visual representation for political purposes can seem underhand - especially when politicians such as the late NT Rama Rao have reaped the benefits of playing Lord Krishna and other deities, both on and off screen.

As for Indira Gandhi and her supporters getting away with her being compared to Durga, smartly enough no one bothered putting that down on a poster. Perhaps, no one needed to forcefully make the connection anyway.

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**P.S.**

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