

## The Living Kumari Goddess of Nepal

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**Abstract** - This research work focuses on the religious belief practised in Nepal, the age old traditional practice known as “Kumari” or the virgin living goddess, worshipping of a virgin girl is extremely popular among the Newar’s of Nepal and also among the believers. The research paper mainly focuses on the origin of the “Kumari” and its impact on the daily life of the people. This research will try to under the significance of kumari worship, the impact on the life of the girls and their contribution towards the society.

**Keywords:** Kumari, Living, Goddess, Nepal.

**Introduction** - The history and the origin about the Kathmandu valley has its way back approximately as old as 100,000 BCE, myth has it that the ‘Valley’ was formed when an enormous lake was completely drained away, the valley came into existence and in present scenario it is known as the capital of Nepal. Nepal is one of a still developing country, but existed long time and is considered to be one of the country of ancient civilization which can even be traced even before the birth of ‘Jesus Christ’, regarding the history of Nepal it is a very long one but a glorious like any other history, in 2008 it was declared as a federal Democratic Republic by the first Constitutional Assembly on 28<sup>th</sup> may. The characteristic which make Nepal special and unique in its own way are the cultures associated with very unique rituals, practices and festivals, among the Kumari tradition is also another striking feature of Nepal uniqueness.

These long practised rituals may often be deemed as very strange to outer world and fascinating at the same time. The tradition “Kumari” is very prominent and it is the pride of the Newari people. In order to understand the tradition of “The living goddess” it is very essential to understand about the Newar community as they are the vital key that provides the insight in knowing about the tradition of the Kumari deeper. The Kumari is basically linked with the Newari’s belief system. It is the Newar who began with the practiced of worshipping of a virgin girl. The Newar in Nepal are little different from other ethnic group mainly because of their mongoloid features and Caucasian roots, the blending of two different ethnic origin

lies the identity of Newar. In present day scenario the population of Newar in Nepal is not much basically due to immigration in other country. The famous Dubar square in Kathmandu valley are mostly occupied by descendants of Newar community till date. The Newar's were originally Buddhist but overtime particularly in the fourteen century there was an increasing Hindu influence which influenced some Newar's who later embraced the caste system of the Hindus. So predominantly there exist two types of Newar's, it can be distinguished as the Buddhist Newar's and the Hindu Newar's. The Newar in Nepal have high regards for their 'Devi' or 'Kumari' because is believed to be the truly embodiment of all source of Shakti and are honoured with great reverence.

The story about the supreme goddess is very essential to understand deeper about Kumari, the connection between goddess Durga and Kumari is important to know about the long practiced tradition. According to the Newar's, we need to have the knowledge of how Durga came into existence, because it is through goddess Durga that the Kumari came in being. It is believed Durga who is the goddess of all Shakti has the potential and power to bring all things to life, and has the power to make it alive, the Newar's strongly believes in the concept of Shakti, without the energy or Shakti there is literally nothing. For this reason, Kumari is held in great admiration and is worshipped immensely, she is believed to the human form of Shakti itself and is known among the people as the remover of all kinds of obstacles and hindrance.

In the book 'the living goddess' the author Isabella tree narrates the story about the supreme goddess Durga, how she came into being, her victories over the demon king and also about how she was addressed as the great unsurpassed goddess. The festival dussehra or Dashain is celebrated by the worshipper, it is one of the most important festival celebrated till date and the longest celebration in Nepal. Dashain the word itself reflects a thrilling festival; the festival is all about the goddess 'Durga' and her conquest over the demon lord 'Mahisasur'. It is believed by the worshippers that Kumari during this time is in her most powerful form as she becomes the splendid goddess Durga herself.

Kumari the living goddess of Nepal plays a very important role in the belief system of the Nepali people, the goddess takes the form in the little girl body until she reaches puberty,

the girl must not bleed because when she bleeds in any way the goddess leaves the body, for this reason Kumari is replaced by new Kumari when she reaches her puberty. Only a girl belonging from Newar community is chosen to be a kumari after going through certain trails to prove that she is indeed the chosen one. When a Kumari is chosen she leaves her home, Kumari Chen becomes her abode until she reaches puberty. The Kumari in order to maintain the pureness she must be virgin and her feet must never touch the ground, a caretaker is kept by her side to tend to her every need, on occasions and festivals Kumari is mostly seen been carried by the caretaker and sometimes in a palanquin, so that her feet never come in contact with the ground.

**Methodology** - The research study data will be collected via primary and secondary resources, in this research the methods like oral source and interviews of Nepali people will be recorded and conducted within the research. The research will be making use of articles and books related to the topic for clarification and making of reports, the research will make an attempt in interviewing the Nepali people and Newar people, expertise help will also be taken into account.

**Inception of Kumari tradition** - Tradition has always been a part of people's life; traditions and rituals comes along with culture. In every society culture plays a very significant role in people's life as it brings along a unique sense of identity and a feeling of belongingness which makes them different in their own ways. Tradition is important as it is linked with cultural beliefs of the ancestors. Regarding the origin of the tradition of 'Kumari Pratha'. It can be traced back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century which can be referred from the book "The Living Goddess" by Isabella Tree. In the book (Tree, 2014), it gives an explanation about the unique beliefs accompanied with its practices which has been carried out since medieval times by the traditional Nepali people and this old tradition is popular in the Nepali society especially the people residing in Kathmandu valley. Tree in her book goes on by saying that the stories associated with the past gradually spread over with times and little historical facts get entangled with myth and legends. Nowhere things and boundaries are complicated and blurred than the origin of the living goddess as it has been suffused with time. According to tree the most accepted version of the story is somewhat linked with the very last of the Malla king of Kathmandu valley for laying down the foundation of the 'Kumari'. He is known as

Jaya Prakasha Malla, who ruled the valley in about the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. King Jaya introduced the practice or tradition of worshipping a living virgin child.

To the common people she is known as Kumari Pratha or the virgin one but to his own people who are the Newaris calls her by the name 'Dyah Meiju, slowly when she attains womanhood, the girl is replaced by another young girl, the reason behind this is to ensure that the young girl, in whose body the goddess Taleju takes forms, is necessary to maintain the purity. This signifies the young girls are supposed to be remained pure without pollution in any form with no blemish or scars and also to never grow old.

Even though the institution regarding the Kumari is seen as very old in the Kathmandu, no one can actually tell how old the institution is, some assumes that it dates back to as old as the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. In fact, it is very challenging to trace its origin, so basically no one is well aware about the historical back ground of the Kumaris.

The most fascinating part of this tradition is that, one can see the blend in religion particularly two of the oldest one among religion i.e. Hinduism and Buddhism especially that of Mahayana Buddhism. Despite the contrast in them there exist religious tolerances between them. The living goddess who is been worshipped by the people of two religions and served by both priest of the two religions, i.e., Hindus and Buddhist, this portrays the beguiling and blending of religious harmony making it one of its kind.

The living goddess who is chosen from the Shakya clan and is originally Buddhist must become the Hindu deity or goddess. Not only Nepali Hindus but the Buddhists visit frequently just to worship the deity who has taken in the form of a girl.

**The Living Goddess** - In Nepali term 'Kumari' means the 'Virgin Goddess' and also in the sense unmarried virgin one, the practice of devotion towards the living goddess has been carried on from many centuries among the Nepali Newar's, the goddess Taleju occupies the body of a young little virgin girl but once she attains puberty and enters womanhood, she is

replaced by another girl from Shakya clan, this over long succession of Kumari's exist till date.

This generational succession of one girl to another is also the reason why many people from corners and in around the world visits Nepal just to get a glimpse of the living goddess, the tradition has now become one of the landmarks particularly for sightseeing tours. In the eyes of the Nepali people the little girl is the personification of the Devi Taleju, the tradition has been fascinating in its unique way although the Kumari in fact are from Buddhist lineage she serves as a vessel for Hindu goddess Taleju who is an important figure and a goddess to the Hindus.

Following this there are several other Kumari's in existence, for instance the Royal Kumari of Kathmandu, Kumari of Patan and Kumari of Bhaktapur. According to the source (Ecsnepal, Aug 2010) in total there are 11 Kumari's in Nepal, various towns in Nepal has its own living goddess as the Nepalese believed in the power of the Kumari for the protection of its own state. Among the Kumari's, Kathmandu, Patan, Bhaktapur Kumari's stands out the most as they are the Kumari's of the main towns in Nepal. However, the Kathmandu Royal Kumari is considered and believed to be the most important one, not only she is adored by many people but is far more powerful and influential.

### **The role of the Living Goddess Kumari**

*“Look upon woman as a goddess whose special energy she is, and honour her in that state. Uttara Tantra”.<sup>1</sup>*

The ancient tradition that has been going on for long period is indeed astonishing; as we go deeper into it this is nothing but a sort of revelation. The belief among the people is so strong that she is seen as extraordinary being who knows everything and nothing escape her eyes as she sees it all, her power is believed to such an extent that she can look into the past as well as future, and also sees everything that is going around the present. The power which the little girl possesses is believed to be from the goddess Taleju herself. Her role is to watch over the whole of Kathmandu by keeping it safe from any harm, protects and watches

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<sup>1</sup> Snow, Kimberley, Keys to the Open Gate: A Woman's Spirituality Sourcebook, Conari Press, 1994, pp 159.

of the people and the valley as well. She is believed to cure all illnesses, she grants immense blessing to those who ask with pure heart, and removes all obstacles that comes in the way of happiness and makes the wicked suffer with a single scornful glance, such is the power of the living goddess believed among the worshippers.

Once a girl is chosen as successor of the previous living goddess she is anointed and sanctified through a religious ceremony, after the process is completed the Kumari is allowed to leave Kumari chen only during special festival which counts to the number of 13 times only a year.<sup>2</sup>

Regarding the selection, the conditions are extremely strict for choosing the living goddess; some say it is a long process and mystical in a way that even the assistance of an astrologer is involved and even a tantric *pujari*, similar with the selection process of Tibet's very own Dalai Lama. The criteria is that the girl has to be extraordinarily beautiful, with glowing and flawless skin dazzling like that of a gold, unblemished body with no scars not even scars of smallpox, birthmark. Traditionally speaking she is believed to be blessed with the physical perfection of bodhisattva having the 32 'Lakshina' physical characteristics, the girl is expected to have a chest like that of a lion, a neck refined like a conch shell; eyelashes similar to a cow, her body should be like a banyan tree; thighs slim and beautiful like deer, a voice so clear and soothingly soft like a duck.<sup>3</sup>

Even if a girl meets all the stated requirements, she has to undergo certain tests which are usually initiated in the dead of the night inside the Kumari chen, no one knows what happens inside the Kumari chen since it is highly an untold secret and remains a mystery till date. Since the Kumari usually belong to a set of belief systems associated with that of rituals of tantricism which is esoteric, because of which various rumours and assumptions are widespread among the people including the Nepalese worshippers. There are other stories regarding the selection, it is also called the dark initiation of a trial where the little girl walks barefoot in

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<sup>2</sup> Agence France-Presse (AFP), Nepal names 3-year old as new 'living goddess of Kathmandu', Hindustan Times, article posted on 27<sup>th</sup> September, 2017

<sup>3</sup> Tree, Isabella, *The Living Goddess*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2014, pp 79.

the courtyard which is scattered with bloods and severed heads of many buffaloes and goats in the meanwhile men disguised themselves as surreal demons jumps around and yowl in the dark shadow. The girl must further spend the night by herself in a locked up room infested with rats and insects throughout the cold night. In the given scenario if the girl child succeeds and shows no sign of fear then it is believed that the goddess Taleju has accepted the girl.

Another requirement is that the Kumari must never bleed, not even a tiny cut because if she cuts or accidentally wound herself and in case if she experience a pain such as a tiny scratch the spirit within her will vanish so keeping in mind that special care is been taken to keep her away from all injury. For that reason, the Kumari is replaced by another girl before she undergoes menstruation or blood loss in other sense the Kumari is dismissed when she reaches puberty or womanhood. This is because in the sight of the traditional Nepalese sees this as impure and pollution.

The Kumari so far who has been selected were mostly chosen at the age as young as 3 years. On 2017 a new Kumari of Kathmandu was chosen as the new “Kumari”, The 3- year old Trisha Shakya the newly chosen living goddess of Nepal.<sup>4</sup>

*“The living goddess Kumari is a supreme goddess.... and she does not undergo any lesson or teaching. She also does not have any playmate. Her caretaker keeps a watch on her day and night”.*<sup>5</sup>

In Nepal and other parts of the world this tradition and centuries of practice has received and attracted lots of criticism in issues related particularly to child right, one activist criticized this practice by stating that, this practiced has caused the childhood of young girl, she argued that the childhood life to play has been denied to the young girls who has to take on the role of a goddess to carry on the tradition and this in turn effects their life, been kept

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<sup>4</sup> Agence France-Presse, Hindustan Times, Nepal names 3-year-old as new 'living goddess' of Kathmandu, 27<sup>th</sup> September, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Shakya, Rashmila, From Goddess to Mortal: The True Life Story of Kumari. Kathmandu, Nepal: Vajra Bookshop, 2007, pp 19.

in an isolation for long time has bridged the gap between her and society and in turn effect the girl education and also development.<sup>6</sup>

In 2008 supreme court of Nepal passed that the Kumari's should be given education as well, so education is provided inside the place or Kumari chen where they live and allowed to give exams. Unlike the Kumari's of Patan and Bhaktapur who is allowed to go school, go out at times by her own self, and lives with her biological family, but in that case of the Kathmandu Kumari such kind of freedom is restricted, even education is given to her inside the building and she is not allowed to venture outside on her home, in reality the Kathmandu Kumari is allowed only 13 times annually only on special occasion. Numerous ex Kumari's have testified about their hard ship and struggle after they are removed from the throne in their reintegration towards the society. In recent years the number of young girls sends forward during the selection process of the living goddess has decreased in present scenario.

During her period as a goddess of the people she lives in isolation away from her home and family, this is case of the kumari's in Kathmandu but in other town like Patan and Bhaktapur they follow a different system where the Kumari lives wither her family in her home.<sup>7</sup>

At the age as young as three to four years, the child goddess mostly spend her time sitting until she attain puberty , on addition to that the Kumari barely leaves the building and when she does she is carried around the arm either by a person from Chittaidar family or by a male person belonging to her same dwelling, as her feet must never touch the ground in order to retain the purity, the lacuna is that since the child is always carried either carried in the arm and palanquin her ability to walk is being hindered, so when the Kumari retires she is finds is difficult to walk like a normal person, this is the first challenges and difficulty experienced by the ex-Kumari's and her biological family, says the people and even told by some ex-Kumari.

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<sup>6</sup> Agence France-Presse, Hindustan Times, Nepal names 3-year-old as new 'living goddess' of Kathmandu, 27<sup>th</sup> September, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Tree, Isabella, The Living Goddess, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2014, pp 159.

There are cases where many former or ex-Kumaris have expressed the challenges. Soon after she retires she is instantly treated like a normal child. This transition from being a goddess where everything is provided without any efforts and to being a normal mortal child has contributed to psychological trauma or damage to a Child's mind. But some justified by saying that the situation is not as bad as people assume, this much is a kind of popular known information in the people's mind.

The tradition has also received many criticism and backlashes mostly from other cultures and sometimes even among Nepali people. It is believed and said that the unanticipated transition from being a mortal child to a goddess and then again to being a child is said to have its price to pay.

**The price of the extraordinary tradition** - In Nepali society menstruation is considered as impure, so when the girl reaches her puberty related to her by blood but on the other hand she also leaves her other family (the caretaker family inside the Kumari chen) with whom she has grown attached with, so said to be a joyous as well as sad time for Kumari when she is released from her duties, though the ex – Kumari doesn't not received the same kind of treatment when she was in the Kumari chen, it is true that she faces a lot of challenges when she retires, since during her year as goddess the Kumari was not permitted to speak except her family and very close friend as result even when she retires and goes back to been mortal she also finds it difficult to communicate with people around her, before she speaks anything she thinks carefully before saying it out loud, the life which she led in the Kumari ghar everything remains and it becomes a part of their life, always in a composed state, with extraordinary patience and always soft spoken, there is a huge difference between the personality of a former Kumari and that of a normal girl .

Most of the former Kumari faced similar challenges in their struggle, trying to bend into the society this thing is common among the ex-Kumari's like issues relating to after effects such as feeling of rejection, insecurity, and little fear, psychological and also physically like difficulty to walk. On such grounds the human right activists consider this

tradition that snatches away the freedom of the little girl, and says the real challenge is when they are no longer a goddess.

One of the major setback about this tradition was that Kumari is replaced when she attains her puberty and is compelled to retire. On matter relating to this a question that was asked when one priest defended by saying that once she attain puberty she is likely to become prone to young men who are distracted, another reason was that since she is no more a child she will be tempted to reveal and tell the secret to others, before anything goes wrong she is dismissed on her first day of period or blood loss. Whatever happens inside the Kumari chen is always a mystery and forbids even the former Kumari to talk about it, the Priest Udhav Karmacharya stated that the mystery and secret of the Kumari chen is very confidential and said that there are something which has to be kept a secret and cannot be promulgated to the people and the world, the priest further went on that Kumari is a god image like figure so it remains a secret and also sacred and if everyone comes to know about the secret then a goddess will be longer in need but she will be just like any ordinary girl.<sup>8</sup>

The superstitious belief that is widespread about the former goddess is widespread among the Newari people who are the staunch believer of this tradition, the former Kumari's are believed to be extremely harmful that they are even capable of causing an unpleasant catastrophe no matter where they go, so many of the native people would not dare to court a girl who is an ex-Kumari, not only that superstition had it that her husband who marries her would not live long as a result native people fears to court an ex Kumari and most of the end up marrying outside and mostly Indians. Because of the superstition linked with the tradition it also causes a hindrance to her life when she becomes of marriageable age. According to the former Kumari they also faced some kind of segregation from society as well, she is sometimes set apart from her community peer group, she faces challenges when she starts going to school. This difference of treatment from people has somewhat contributed in the form of psychological effects and hurting their sentiments leaving it an untold scar.

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<sup>8</sup> McCarthy, Julie, 'The Very Strange life of Nepal's Child Goddess', National Public Radio (NPR), posted on 28th May, 2015 (accessed on 27th April, 2019), <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/05/28/410074105/the-very-strange-life-of-nepals-child-goddess>

There have been many debates and clashes on this topic about the century's old tradition. Lawyer Pun Devi Maharjan gave the argument "it violates rights of child and women's right. It is another form of child labour using child in the form of deity and making money". Meanwhile, Dr. Maharjan professor of culture at Tribhuvan University gave the argument that, "*even though it is against human right but it is pride of tradition. It is country's oldest tradition to be preserved*".

In the name of tradition, some people misuses by causing and damaging the image of the kumari in many aspects, Nepal is known for tourist attraction and Kumari are being used as a landmark to attract tourist pictures of Kumari in poster and guide book is popular in Nepal. Tourism also contributes to this evil as tour companies cheat tourist using Kumari's name. In 2018 numerous Tour Company and Guides Company of Nepali are making deals with the Kumari regarding offering making out of tours. People over came with greed are not only cheating the Kumari but also the tourist and the Kumari's family.

Human right activist and previous administrator Mrs Sapan Pradhan Mall remarks on the Kumari when everybody surrender themselves and worship her she feels preminent. The government is also involved in the form of extracting not only the tourism industry.

Women's Rehabilitation Center (WOREC), Nepalese women rehabilitation centre rebuked the tradition for snatching the young girl's childhood and let alone to live in isolation,<sup>1</sup> forbidding her to have connection with the society. It is a known knowledge among the Nepalese, the short-coming of this tradition is that the former Kumari and her family are always faced with the challenges, like helping her to get used to the normal life and also blending in their society.

The process of nature of choosing a Kumari has also gained the attention since way back, till today the process inside the Kumari chen is still a mystery among the people at large, it has always been secretive that even the family members are not allowed to know about it.

Critically assessing some of the practice that catch most people attention including different cultures, outside country, also Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and human right activist is due to certain practice that is associated with the practice such as isolation where the little girl has to live a life of isolation at the most like 9 year sometimes 13 years, life concerning after their retirement as ex-goddess, most importantly the main thing that the human right activist and NGOs are concerned that this practice is associated with little girls as little as 3 years old.

**Conclusion** - The study conducted so far gives an explanation that the tradition of Kumari is a myth, which evolved till date and is being carried on so far. The origin of Kumari dates back to the connection with the goddess Durga, this describes that the myth is also deeply rooted with the Hindu Vedic religion. The common people on the other side devote to Kumari primarily for the hope of benevolence, worshipping her brings the most immediate and effective result for the people those who are in miseries, others for the fear of uncertain future. The people fully believed in the concept that that gods and demons monitors and rule the human world from above. The belief system to some extend plays a role in the life of the people in Nepal, Nepali people worshipped the living goddess as she is seen as the one who protects and removes obstacles

The study so far somewhat revealed that the Kumari also has its influence in the political arena as her blessing is regarded as great deal and is highly respected even by the ruling head, in terms of economy the Kumari practise contributes to the economy of the country as the apart of the tourist attraction. There are some travel agencies who take advantage of the situation by deceiving people from outside, which in a way affects the image of the Kumari.

Seeing this century old practice, the study also discovered that some Nepali people staying abroad, does not really appreciate the practice as they believe it is affecting the life of the young child greatly. Regarding this matter it is very controversial, while some supports the tradition and take pride in it, some are against it seeing the challenges of the girls after they are relieved of their duties. The comparison was made between some ex-Kumari's, the

views again varies from one answer to another, that may be because they underwent different treatment and circumstance, it is very difficult to draw the real conclusion due to many clashes in the point of view. The activities inside Kumari chen has always been a mystery, the working of the living goddess worship is kept secret from people, that may be due to biblical reason. In the view of many activists like NGO's they are against such practices since it is related to their profession that is social issues, seeing the involvement of a young girls in the tradition has indeed caused an uproar and issues highly discussed among NGO's.

During the study, it showed some light, Kumari which is the living goddess has its impact and outcomes, through these traditions we see a blending of religion in harmony. The idea of isolation is probably little worrisome since many challenge are faced by the former Kumari, it is challenging on the ground that they have to cope up with the ways of the society, they are suddenly exposed to the truth which takes time for them accept reality, when they were a Kumari they were adored by the people but when removed they somewhat becomes invisible, which is a sad truth. The practised of Kumari is indeed fascinating and in fact way much better compared to the devdasi system in India, but it cannot be denied the fact that it takes some toll on the life of the girls. Besides the practised compared to the previous times has deteriorated a little, not very glorious like it used to be.

Regarding the study about the 'the living goddess' to understand deeper about what the truth really is, more research need to be done in person, the articles, books, sources, oral interview are very complicated as some are biased and varies in opinion so it is indeed very challenging to draw the authentic conclusion. Regarding the subject not many books are available and very less sources. It is the finding of this research that in order to understand the world of Kumari properly, first person research is the best approach.

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