

## [Nepal's Virgin Goddesses](#)

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DIVINITY

## Nepal's Virgin Goddesses

The ancient practice of Kumari worship is vigorously alive today, deep in Nepal's Kathmandu Valley. A young virgin girl, Kumari, is selected as the embodiment of Goddess Taleju. A Kumari's dharma is to serve and bless the people. Her brief reign is a time of discipline and personal sacrifice.

Special report by author V. Carroll Dunham, a Nepal resident, with contributions by J. Michael Luhan.

Wandering crowds of camera-toting, pot-bellied tourists, so essential to Nepal's fragile economy, wear shorts and clothes too tight for this essentially conservative culture. They crowd the temple-palace complex, the Kumari Ghar, deep in the heart of Kathmandu's Durbar Square, the oldest section of a very old city. Everyone wants a glimpse of the virgin girl Goddess. A tourist guide yells up to the elaborate 18th century wood-carved windows of the second floor. Looking like a Moghul miniature, the present Kumari, a little girl no more than five, her eyes blackened with kohl, the soot from a sacred butter lamp, dressed in regal red, is carried to the window and solemnly peers down on the gaping crowd without uttering a word. "Was that her? That little girl?" A woman with a strong

New York accent questions incredulously. Lacking the knowledge to show traditional devotion, the crowd brazenly ogles her, like an exotic bird in the zoo. As quickly as they look, she is withdrawn from the window. Little do they or any Westerners really know about the inner life of the Kumari--for ritually impure Westerners are forbidden from her restricted quarters. Shrouded with the secrecy associated with tantric rituals, taught from an early age that a Goddess is to utter as few words as possible, the inner feelings of a Kumari remain as mysterious and inaccessible to Westerners as a statue made of stone.

Among the most ancient of Hindu practices, Kumari puja (virgin worship) dates back at least 2,300 years to the late Vedic period. In essence it utilizes purity to call forth the presence of powerful Deities for direct offering of devotions. In India, for example, orthodox Hindu families worship their unmarried daughters as the great Durga during the annual 10-day Dashera festival. But only in the Kathmandu Valley is Kumari puja institutionalized in the form of living Goddesses.

Not any girl can become a Kumari, whose reign generally lasts about ten years, even if she wanted to. Though Taleju is a Hindu deity, the royal Kumari is always chosen from the Newar Buddhist Sakya caste of goldsmiths and silversmiths. The current line trace their beginnings to an 18th century Hindu king, Jayaprakasa Malla. According to the story, the king was a worshiper of Taleju, one of the many forms of Durga and protectress of the Malla royal lineage. So ardent was his devotion that from time to time She would enter his chamber in the guise of a red serpent and then transform Herself into a woman of radiant beauty. One day, however, the king's

thoughts towards her took a libidinous turn, and for punishment Taleju declared thereafter She would only commune with him by inhabiting the body of a young girl. With a twist of divine irony, the girl She selected would be from a local caste of Buddhists.

Hence, while Nepalese Hindus believe the Royal Kumari to be a living embodiment of Taleju, local Vajrayana Buddhists regard her as their chief female deity Vajradevi--a union of religious identities that subsequently assumes enormous significance in a country marked by sharp ethnic divisions.

The royal Kumari candidates, who are generally 3 to 4 years of age, are screened by a special committee comprised of Newar and Hindu priests, the royal astrologer and the king's religious adviser (raj guru). Once their choice is made, the designee's horoscope is checked against the king's to assure a positive compatibility. Above all, the Kumari must always exhibit the perfect composure of a true Goddess, and for this a final, extraordinary test is administered.

The setting for it is kalratri ("black night"), the anniversary of Durga's Puranic slaying of the demon Mahisasura which saved the primordial universe from evil. Each year the event is reenacted with the massive midnight beheading of 108 water buffaloes in the outer courtyard of an ancient temple in Kathmandu known as Hanuman Dhoka. Shortly after the slaughter, the Kumari-elect is brought to the courtyard entrance. Greeting her are neat rows of buffalo heads laid out on the ground with lighted wicks placed between their horns, the paving stones underfoot still glistening with pools of fresh

blood. As the selection committee looks on from a balcony, the little girl must then make a clockwise circuit of the macabre display and while doing so not betray any sign of fear or stress.

The present royal Kumari was chosen in 1991 at the tender age of two. "She was screened by the royal astrologer, many priests, and the King's religious advisor," her father Amrit Sakya tells me. She was also inspected by female attendants for the necessary "32 perfections" of a Goddess. These include clear skin with small pores, even teeth, black hair and eyes, soft hands, a moist tongue, no bad body odors and "small and well-recessed sexual organs." Most importantly she must show no signs of ever having bled, as from a cut or nosebleed, for it will be blood that will signify the end of her reign as a living Goddess.

Apart from her family, the little girl Goddess has lived over two years in isolation in the ornate, recently restored 18th century Kumari Ghar. Her daily schedule varies little. Attendants set her hair in a ritual bun, her eyes are rimmed with kohl, extending like a Zen painter's stroke to her temples, while her forehead is distinctively painted with a vermilion red, black and golden all-seeing "fire-eye," and each day she sits on her lion throne for two or three hours. At this time a priest from the nearby Taleju temple performs a purification rite, using objects said to cleanse each of the five sensory organs: flour for the ears, rice for the mouth, incense for the nose, a lamp for the eyes and red powder for touch. The Kumari receives up to a dozen faithful devotees every day. "Many people come to see the Kumari," the Kumarima, a small elderly woman explained. "Some come with medical problems, especially illnesses

related to bleeding. Many government officials visit, hoping her blessings will ensure promotion."

She must remain solemn and silent, sitting cross-legged in her gilt-canopied lion throne while the line of worshipers shuffles through her private chamber, each person touching the floor with his or her head and laying down offerings of money, fruit and flowers. To her followers, every movement the child makes is deemed a sign from the Goddess Taleju. If she receives a petition in unmoved silence, it will be fulfilled; should she laugh, cry or rub her eyes, the supplicant will fall ill or even die. Anita Sakya, now in her early twenties, was the royal Kumari seven years ago. Shy and reserved, as most ex-Kumaris are known to be, she told me a sad story. "I was just a little girl. Once an old, sick man came to be blessed. He was so sick he coughed and a touch of spit landed on my toe. My attendants gasped. He died the next day. I felt very sad. I believed I was responsible for his death."

For all the aura of power surrounding her, the Kumari appears to live a lonely existence. Her only companions are the hereditary chaperone, the Brahmin priest and a dozen Buddhist priests. She isn't taught to read or write, and she has no playmates of her own age. She lives a disciplined life adhering to a strict diet and wakes up early every morning to spend a few hours at her devotions. Her original name and identity are forgotten. The priest tells her she is beyond joy and sorrow--she is now a Deity in human form. She is told that if she weeps or laughs, the Deity may leave her. Forbidden to go out in sunlight, the silk-hung rooms are her private sanctuary.

"When I was Kumari, I would look out the window at all the children playing. I wanted to play, too," Dil Kumari, a woman with graying hair whose childhood as a living Goddess ended over forty years ago, explained to me. "I wanted to be like a butterfly and fly down to join the playing children. I used to play stones and jacks by myself. When I was a Goddess, it was like that," she lamented. Nani Maya, a Kumari over twenty years ago, recalls, "I have such fond memories of my time as Kumari. I love all the caretakers at the Kumari ghar more than my own family. I still go and visit Kumari and her attendants almost every week."

A girl cannot stay a Kumari forever. With the first shedding of blood, the Deity Taleju leaves the child's body, returning her once more to the everyday world. In 1991, ten days before the big Dasain Festival, microphones announced that the reigning twelve-year-old Kumari would be replaced. "When I began to menstruate, I didn't know what was happening," Rashmilla, the last reigning royal Kumari shyly explained. She was worshiped one last time in the company of the new Kumari, then her ornaments were removed. She was led by the head priest, twenty guardians and priests to her family home which she would not remember.

Once worshiped as divine, the youth must quickly adapt to being treated as a normal girl. After the customary four days in isolation in a dark room with no sunlight, female attendants of the Taleju temple undo the little girl's hair bun and remove her last token bangle, signifying the beginning of her life as a mortal.

Dil Kumari remembers the difficulties of adjusting to leaving her post. "When I left the Kumari temple and went to live with my mother and father, I didn't want to stay. I just wanted to go back to the temple." For Rashmilla's family, the sense of prestige associated with a virgin Goddess daughter has been tempered by feelings of bitterness. A forthright woman with a bush of curly hair, her mother Pragma Devi tells me, "If I knew then what I know now, I would never have let Rashmilla become the royal Kumari. It's been too hard for her to adjust. She can't read or write. She never talks, she rarely smiles. When we joke and laugh, she sits quietly, withdrawn. We, her family, are strangers to her. The other day she turned to me and asked me, 'Mother, why did you ever let me become Kumari?'"

Weaned from pomp and leisure, an ex-Kumari reenters her family's household as a normal family member, expected to cook, clean and do other chores. Dil Kumari recalls the hardship of returning home and having to suddenly adjust to her arranged marriage and the many duties of a Nepali wife. "Married life was difficult after being treated like a Deity. As a daughter-in-law, I had to obey my in-laws. As a wife, I had to obey my husband. I was accustomed to people worshipping me and bringing me gifts. As a wife, I was expected to sweep the floor, cook rice and carry water. I was a little bit lazy. My husband beat me and said, 'You're no good. You're worthless, and I'm going to leave you.' Each year I would go and see the new Kumari being pulled in the chariot and my heart was sad."

In the old days, an even bleaker future awaited ex-living-Goddesses. Few Nepalese want to marry a dethroned Goddess. There are superstitious stories such as snakes

issuing forth from ex-Kumaris, devouring weak husbands. Many will cite examples from ex-Kumari's lives in an effort to verify this myth. Out of nine recent ex-Kumaris, seven married, and their husbands died within the first year of marriage, say local residents.

Still, not all Kumari's lives are met with misfortune or unhappiness. Nani Maya was the royal Kumari over twenty years ago. She is a well-adjusted, happily married middle-aged wife and mother of two children who now runs her own pharmacy. "I feel blessed to have been a Kumari. It was a real privilege. But my husband feels otherwise. When the priests asked us to offer our daughter, he refused. He would rather see our daughter receive an education. When I see the chariot being pulled at the Indrajaatra festival, my heart is filled with joy and remembering." For Nani Maya, the difficulties of everyday life have made her nostalgic for the safety of a divine past. "I have a recurring dream of being chased through the streets of Kathmandu by an unknown Goddess. I run and run and only find refuge in the safety of the Kumari's quarters."

I walk one last time over to the royal Kumari Ghar and place offerings of flowers and money on a stone in the center of the courtyard. I ask the attendant that it go to her future schooling, since the pension the government provides for her once she leaves office (RS640 a month--about US\$11) cannot even begin to cover school fees, let alone tutoring fees necessary for her to catch up with lost schooling once she is retired. The little Goddess is taken to the window by the Kumarima, and I am blessed with the vision of her face before a busload of tourists stream in for a look. Despite her exposure to thousands, the Kumari's power and inner feelings--of



freedom or loneliness--remain her own silent mystery. "We need Kumaris, no Goddess is more important to this valley," Siddhi Laxmi said.

As old traditions and ways of life fade in this rapidly changing city, just how many Newar Buddhist families will continue to choose the dharma of a virgin Goddess for their daughters, is anyone's guess.

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### Dharma Kumari

Having reigned longest, she is said to hold the real power . . .

Dharma Kumari Bajracharya has found permanent refuge and safety. She has never had to face adjusting to daily life for she claims the goddess Taleju has never left her. The forty-five-year-old living Goddess lives in the town of Patan in a beautiful, traditional Newar home with elaborately carved windows, small doorways and freshly painted, clean mud floors. Like the child Goddesses, Dharma Kumari rarely speaks. So first I meet her mother, Siddhi Laxmi, a devout woman of seventy-one. Unlike the royal Kumari, the Patan Kumari is allowed to live at home and is only taken to the Kumari ghar for ceremonies and festivals. Siddhi Laxmi delicately fills clay cups with home-brewed rice liquor and tells me the story of her daughter and the controversy surrounding her. "When she was a little girl, no more than two, I found her in her room playing with two snakes: one red and one yellow. She was two years old when chosen Kumari in 1953. The astrologers

predicted she would reign longer than any other Kumari."

Neighborhood politics boiled over three years ago when a young girl was installed to formally replace her as the ruling Patan Kumari. "The priests summoned her to the temple for inspection--to see if she still had Taleju's energy. They could find no marks to disqualify her, no marks of bleeding, for she has never menstruated. All they could find was a slight scratch on her ear. For this they said she could no longer reign. Asked what she thought, she replied, "It is not my opinion. It is Taleju's decision. When she is ready to leave me, she will."

When I go and bow down before her with offerings of flowers, incense, fruit and some money, she gives me a big tilaka of rice and red powder on my third eye--a sign my soul has made union with Taleju. I sense her unique energy, as she sits silently, crouched in a seat designed for a child, alone in this room. I realize that this is all she has ever known--that most of her forty-five years of existence have taken place in this room. Only during festival times when carried through the streets has she ever seen the outside world. When given the opportunity to leave the duties of divinity, she chose instead to become an expert at what she knows rather than face an unfamiliar world. Unlike the child Kumaris, who in a sense are controlled by the priests who worship them until puberty, Dharma Kumari has become an unusually powerful living Goddess, for she now can fulfill the elaborate secret rituals that traditionally only male Buddhist priests perform.

"She was never taught to read or write, and yet she reads the sutras and performs ceremonies," her mother explains. "She

has no signs of unhappiness. She is very happy with her power." When I ask how Kumari feels about her self-imposed confinement, her mother replies, "She never feels sad that she cannot leave her room, because she already knows everything that goes on outside of her room. She sees everything. She sees the future. She is free inside."