

Indrajatra—a week long festival—so much so that it dominates this popular festival. People make the journey to Kathmandu to receive a blessing from the Kumari.

During special festivals, the child goddess is dressed in elaborate costume and bejeweled for her ride in a horse drawn chariot which takes her through the old city of Nepal.

A Life of Isolation

Only during these special occasions is the Kumari allowed outside of her temple. Rarely does the child goddess show herself to her devotees. It is also not possible to take photographs of her which can be done only by official



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government photographers or during the festivals when she appears in public.

The Kumari lives in a world of isolation. She is cut off from all contact with her

parents, home and society. She lives only with a caretaker family. The caretaker family is the *de facto* mistress of the Kumari's abode and the actual beneficiary of the generous gifts given to the child goddess. The child is naturally unaware of the material value of the precious gems and jewels bestowed upon her.

The Kumari's caretaker family, which also comes from the same line as the child goddess, is also the

one who decides what gifts the child goddess should receive. When the child goddess relinquishes her duties to another child, the caretaker family may give her

“We Dreamt of Becoming Nuclear Physicists”

A Nepalese woman looks back at her childhood.

There is a sense of tranquility all around Angur, a woman almost 65 years old. The tranquility is a testament to her faith and the outlook she has had on her life. Born in 1932, Angur is the second daughter—and therefore most unwelcome addition—in her family. Her mother and father had to tend to the fields so they left Angur in the care of an aunt when she was barely five months old.

Upon their return, Angur's parents found their second daughter barely alive. Her father was so grief stricken by her condition that she became his pet from that day onwards, even when a son was born 13 months later.

Angur was brought up in an extended family household—her parents, brothers, sisters and the family of an uncle. They were nine altogether. In those days, which unfortunately are not so different

from today, only the boys received an education. A private tutor gave the boys their lessons while the girls listened in the background.

One day, the tutor asked the boys questions about their English lessons that they couldn't answer. To the tutor's surprise, the girls answered the questions. Their mother happened to overhear the tutor scolding the boys and praising the girls. When the father learned of the incident, instead of scolding the boys further, he allowed the girls to study along with the boys.

Angur grew up in a time when children were married at very young ages. Today, the law requires a young girl to be 14 before she is allowed to marry although child marriages are not uncommon in Nepal's rural areas. At the age of 10, Angur was introduced to a boy of 11 and asked if she liked him. She remembers thinking to herself that he

a memento of her time as Kumari. The girl, however, is not allowed to take all her valuable gifts with her.

Origins of the Kumari

The Kumari is said to be one of the manifestations of Adi Shakti Durga, one of the thirty three million gods and goddesses in the Hindu faith. In one of the rare dances, Adi Shakti Durga is represented as killing a *Daitya* (devil) by giving him poison after enchanting him with her beauty, youth and dance. D u r g a sculptures on the palace of the Kumari and the child goddess's role in the Durgapuja festival also attest to this belief.

But within the context of Nepalese society where women are not given the same rights and privileges as men, how did this practice of worshipping a girl-child begin?

According to one of the stories in the Vamsavalis regarding the origin of the Kumari, the rulers of Nepal were given the privilege of a regular audience with the

which was not to be seen by women. But it is said that the daughter of the king happened to look at the talisman one day.

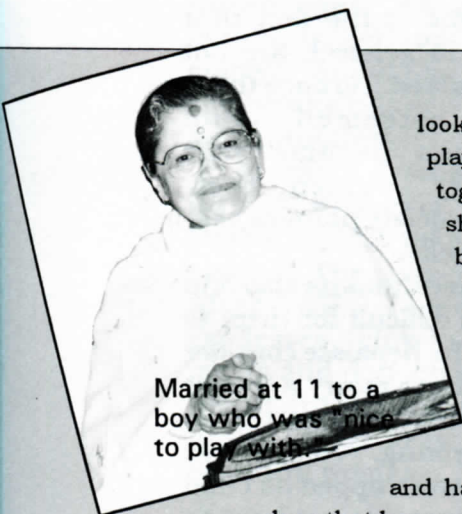
As a result, the king was deprived of the divine audience with the goddess. In his dream, however, the goddess advised the king that she would be going inside the body of a Sakya (Buddhist) girl. This began the custom of selecting the Kumari from the Sakyas.

According to D h o o s w a n Sayami, the Sakyas trace themselves back to Buddha, the

lion of the Sakyas. In the last decade of the 14th century A.D., a Malla king, Jayasthiti Malla reorganised Nepalese society. There were a large

The Kumari lives in a world of isolation

patron goddess, Taleja Bhavani, with whom the king, Trilokya Malla, used to play dice. This king had a diamond *Jantra* (talisman),



looked like "a nice boy to play with" and they spoke together easily. Little did she know that the young boy was being chosen as her husband. They were married one year later. Angur had remembered seeing her sister's wedding at the age of seven

and had asked herself, "Why does that happen?" Today, recalling her own wedding day, Angur says "that was one of my happy days. I never cried when I was married. They were giving me presents, honoring me, decorating me."

Angur and her husband lived separately for the first years of their marriage. But her mother-in-law, who had been widowed at the age of 15, was keen to have a grandson. So, when Angur turned 14, her husband came to live with her. "My husband would

go to school and when he came back he would teach me. He would be my teacher. He taught me mathematics, history, and geography. He taught me English and other things I sought to know." In a rather wistful way, Angur says, "We dreamt a beautiful dream...to be the first nuclear physicists." It was a dream that her husband did succeed in becoming. But for Angur, it was a dream that she was not allowed to fulfill, simply because she was born a female. She was not allowed into the laboratories and therefore could not continue in the sciences along with her husband. She was instead forced to take up humanities, which led her to political science and eventually to law. Although she has clearly excelled and was happy with what she did, Angur's eyes still carry the tears of longing for that long ago dream.

When will the time come when the fluke of nature and the whims of society's rules stop preventing girls from achieving their true dreams?

by N.P. Arcellana