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A study of the *Rāj-Kumārī* in Kathmandu, Nepal

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Abstract

It is believed that the living *Kumārīs* of Nepal is the human form of the Goddess *Śakti*. A young maiden is selected from the Sakya community for this worship. In this paper, I have discussed the *Rāj-Kumārī* of Kathmandu, Nepal.

Keyword: Goddess, *Kumārī*, Nepal, Maiden, *Ācājū*

Introduction

*kanyā devyā svayaṃ proktā kanyārūpā tu śūlinī ||17||
yāvat akṣatayoniḥ syāt tāvat devyā surārihā |
(Devīpurāṇa, Ch. 35, V. 17cd-18ab)*

Kanyās or *Kumārīs* or the virgins are generally considered the purest manifestation of the supreme goddess *Śakti* and they are too worshipped in the Veda, the Purāṇa, by the gods and the priests. Nepal is one of the countries where the citizens not only worship the Mother Goddess in an idol form, but they also worship them in a human form, in maidens, known as the Living Goddess as the form of Mother Goddess or Durga or Taleju. Kathmandu, Bhaktapur (known as Bhadgaon), and Patan (presently known as Lalitpur) - are the three famous places in Nepal where the worship of *Kumārī* takes place. In this paper, I would like to focus on the *Rāj-Kumārī* of Kathmandu, Nepal.

In the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka*, we find the earliest reference of *Śakti*, she is mentioned as *Kanyākumārī* (Allen, 1975:2), similarly, we find reference in the *Devīmāhātmya* of the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa*, deals with the details of *Kumārī*. Cape Comorin or *Kanyākumārī* in Tamilnadu and the *Kaniya* temple in Kangra, Himachal Pradesh are some of the important sacred religious places where *Kumārīs* are worshipped. Though we get very less information on them in the present-day literature, according to Slusser (1982:313) while the worship of the living *Kumārī* is still followed in Cormorin/*kanyākumārī*^[1], Allen (1975:2, fn. 2) mentioned of worshipping living goddess in Kangra Valley, Himachal Pradesh in 1920^[2]. We also see in Kolkata, the worship of the living goddess on the ninth day of the Durgapuja when a young Brahmin maiden sits below the idol of ma Durga and the priest worships her as the goddess (See Slusser, 1982: 313). Nevertheless, this ritual happens in India only on some specific days, but in Nepal, the young maiden receives worship daily as a living form of the Goddess.

In Nepal, the earliest mention of the *Kumārī* is found in the regime of the sixth century ruling Licchavi king *Śivadeva I*^[3] (Allen, 1975:2-3). The worshipping of the living *Kumārī* most probably started by the king of Patan, *Lakṣmīkāmadeva* (1024-1040 CE) when he worshipped the daughter of *Lakṣmībharman* (Sakya caste) who stayed in a *bihar* near Patan Durbar and started the *Kumārīpujā*^[4].

¹ "Beyond this there is another place called Comari, at which are the Cape of Comari and a harbor; hither come those men who wish to consecrate themselves for the rest of their lives, and bathe and dwell in celibacy; and women also do the same; for it is told that a goddess once dwelt here and bathed." (W.H. Schoff, *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, p.46).

² "Devi is personified in a girl under ten years of age twice a year and offerings are made to her as if to the goddess on these occasions." (H.H. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province I*, p.327).

³ The ruling period of *Śivadeva I* is 590-604 CE. (Mary Shepherd Slusser, *Nepal Mandala: A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley I*, p.21).

⁴ Michael Allen, *The Cult of Kumari*, p.3.

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If this information seems right, then it's clear that the living *Kumārīpujā* in Patan is approximately two centuries older than the living *Kumārīpujā* in Kathmandu by the Malla Kings. The three places in Nepal where the living goddess is worshipped, have their selected *Kumārīs* ^[5]. We also find some mythological legends or myths of these places which tell how Goddess Taleju decides to stay inside a young Sakya girl child, during the period of the last king of the Malla dynasty of Kathmandu, *Jayaprakāśamalla* ^[6]. (1735-1768 CE), and *Trailokyamalla* (1561-1610 CE) of Bhaktapur and *Siddhinarasimha* (1619-1661 CE) of Patan.

If we focus on Kathmandu's main living goddess (*Rāj-kumārī*), we can find out that the *Rāj-kumārī* is chosen from the Sakya group of the Baha ^[7]. Apart from her, there are three more *Kumārīs* from the other caste in Kathmandu, such as *Mu Kumārī* and *Kwabaha Kumārī* (both of them are selected from the Vajracharya caste) and *Kilagar Kumārī* (she is from the Jyapu caste).

For the selection of the *Rāj-kumārī* of Kathmandu, there is a selection committee of the *Bada Guruju* (a Gorkhali Brahman and chief royal priest), the *Ācāyū* priest (he takes part in the selection and installation of *Kumārī*) of the Taleju temple, the *Pañca Buddha* (a group of five Buddhist priests of Vajracharya caste), and the royal astrologer. The first stage of the selection is thirty-two basic signs ^[8], whoever comes closest to that list, is selected for the next stage. On the eighth day of the Dasain festival, which is also known as *Mahā-aṣṭamī* or *Kālarātrī*, at the midnight the selected little girl enters alone the Mulchow, a small inner courtyard in Hanuman Dhoka palace, Kathmandu. The room is full of the heads of the dead buffalos which the priest has sacrificed to the goddess Taleju. At the entrance, that girl takes a clockwise turn and reaches the idol of the goddess. If she manages to fulfill this task without any fear and with her calmness, then the *Ācāyū* and his assistant priest take her to the *āgama* room on the first floor and install her as the living goddess with her proper tie knot hair (also known as *fakhe sanpho*), *tikā* mark, third eye (*agni chakchhu* or fire eye) on her forehead, red garments, red paint on her toes and jewelry and then bring her to the place where the people are waiting for their new *Kumārī*. After coming out from the Mulchow, she walks on a white cloth to her official residence (*Kumārī Ghar*) ^[9]. Losing a tooth or getting menstruation or getting any kind of wound or smallpox- are some of the signs which disqualify the *Kumārī*. If any one of them, is visible then, the authority disqualifies the present *Rāj-Kumārī* and starts searching for a new maiden.

It is believed that *Jayaprakāśamalla*, the last Malla king of Kathmandu (1735-1768 CE) started the worshipping procedure of the living Goddess in Kathmandu and he also started the chariot festival for the living goddess (Allen, 1975:8). He built a three-storied temple (also known as *Kumārī Ghar* or *Kumārī-Bahal* or *Rājalakṣmīkula-Vihāra*), in the Darbar Square (an architectural complex) in 1757 CE (See Slusser, 1982:196) where the young goddess stays after leaving her family ^[10] with her *Kumārīmā* (who looks after the *Kumārī* in the *Kumārī Ghar*). *Kumārīmā*, her caretaker, lives there with her family. It is her or her other female member's duty to make the *Kumārī* ready for the daily

worship (*nityapujā*) which is done by the *Ācāyū* priest in her regular attire. The *Ācāyū* does *PañcabaharaPujā* (a purification rite) which consists of a combination of five things to clean the five organs (flour for the ear, rice for the mouth, a lamp for the eyes, incense for the nose, and red powder for touch) for her ^[11]. *Kumārīmā* fixes the appointments between the Living Goddess and her devotees who want to worship her. Generally, the *kumārī* spends her time two to three hours sitting on the throne for her devotees (especially women who are suffering from excessive menstrual bleeding or miscarriage). Sometimes she plays with her caretaker's grandchildren, sometimes she visits her worshipper's home for private worship. There are a few selected days when she comes out from her palace and is visible to her devotees, such as during the Dasain and Mohani festivals ^[12].

Indrajātrā and *Kumarījātrā* are two-annual celebrations, that happen together where the *Rāj-kumārī* takes part. *Indrajātrā*, a harvesting festival (Slusser, 1982:268), is signified by dance and the portrayal of the deity *Indra* whereas during *Kumarījātrā*, the *kumārī* is taken on a three-day tour in her chariot in Kathmandu city. On the third day of the *Indrajātrā*, the king comes to get the blessing from her ^[13]. In the festival two Sakya young boys play the role of *kumārī*'s two attendants *Gaṇeśa* and *Bhairava* and they also travel with her in other smaller chariots (Slusser, 1982:314).

Apart from the *Rāj-Kumārī*, we find information on the *Kumārīgaṇa* and *PañcaKumārī* who are also worshipped with the *Rāj-Kumārī* in the Dasain festival. *Kumārīgaṇa* consists of eight Sakya maidens who act as the attendant of the *Rāj-Kumārī* of Kathmandu on the evening of the ninth day (*navamī*) of the Dasain festival. They wear some simple jewelry and do their hair and face makeup like the *Rāj-Kumārī*. Then, they are taken to Mulchowk from Darbar square and they are worshipped by the *Ācāyū* priest (Allen, 1975:20). They gather only for a few hours during the Dasain festival to perform a ritual. Whereas the *PañcaKumārī*'s role is to act as a welcoming member to the local foreign delegates (Slusser, 1982:315).

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⁵ Allen has described the eleven *kumārīs*. *Ibid*, pp.6-7.

⁶ For Kathmandu's mythological story, see Slusser p.311.

⁷ For more on Baha, see *Ibid*, p.137.

⁸ For the thirty-two signs, See Allen p.9, fn. 8.

⁹ *Ibid*, pp.8-11.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.12.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.13.

¹² Allen has given the list of the festivals in his book when *Kumārī* makes her public appearance for her devotees (pp.16-20).

¹³ Slusser, p.76).