

Research Article

KUMARI TRADITIONS: A STUDY ON PERFORMATIVE ACTIVITY

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ABSTRACT

Kumari is a prominent culture of Newari communities from their ancestors. However, it gets involved with different approaches of supportive as well as denial views in term of socio-cultural performance. The research is an effort to analyze that how the worship of Kumari or "Virgin Goddess" is a form of reproduction phenomenon practised in Kathmandu valley. It triggers people's emotions and they believe in transformation from girl to Goddess and the Goddess to ordinary human beings. The article aims at showing how these unique traditions of Nepal associated with a pre-pubescent girl from a Shakya clan of Kathmandu selected as a Kumari has got the great significance in the nation. Based on the theory of Richard Schechner and other class notes related to Performance studies, the researcher tries to analyse the Kumari tradition and dig the hidden meaning of the present Kumari tradition with a rhetorical reproduction phenomenon which is full of per formative activity.

Keywords: Kumari culture, living Goddess, performative activities, Newari culture, myth.

INTRODUCTION

The Kumari is typically regarded as the Goddess through the religious and cultural doctrine of mythology. It is basically worshipped to a virgin girl by paying homage and reverence in the form of pure Goddess. It relates with the Hindu deities for its historical proofs and evidence. Kumari defines as a virgin the word derived from Sanskrit Kaumarya which signifies pure princess in the form of Goddess. In Nepal, Kumari is the divine power to whom devotees adorn and worship from the age of three to five unless she steps on her adolescents (Thomas & Hillary, 2006). The worship of Kumari is one of the popular prevalent Newari cultures of Nepal in which a pre-pubescent girl from a Shakya clan of Kathmandu is selected as living goddess and worshipped by both Hindus and Buddhists (Sigdel, 2021). The Kumari who is worshipped as the living goddess in Kathmandu is a small girl who lives in a beautiful holy place beautifully carved wooden window called the palace of Kumari (Basnet, 2002). Her worship continues until she gets menstruation or any bleeding from her body takes place. When a Kumari retires, another one is chosen and the same sort of continuity is given. Tamrakar(2058) in an article of The Kathmandu Post writes, "The whole concept of Kumari is living goddess originated when tantricism was at its height in the Kathmandu valley. The Bajracharya and Shakya clans played a crucial role and so the tradition of requiring the Kumari to come from the Shakya clan" (p. 10). Though Kumari, the virgin goddess comes from Buddhist Shakya clans and selected by five Buddhist tantric priests, she is worshipped by Hindus and Buddhists with equal respect of deity (Bajracharya, 2005).

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF KUMARI TRADITIONS BASED ON PERFORMATIVE ACTIVITY

In 1980s the study of Performative activity came up with the concept of looking at theatre and drama. Later, it expanded on the modern theatres and the movies. From 1990s onwards, Performance studies started looking at different disciplines. It borrows the ideas from

Politics, Sociology, Computer Science, History, Social issues, Culture, Fashion, and Rituals. Schechner (2003) in his article "Rituals and Performance" writes: "Rituals are performative: they are acts done; and performances are ritualized: they are codified, repeatable actions. The functions of theatre identified by Aristotle and Horace-entertainment, Celebration, enhancement of social solidarity, education (including Political education), and healings are also functions of rituals." (p. 613). The living goddess Kumari has got much respect and dignity. Each year, kings of Nepal worship her and she receives blessing and power. So, worship of Kumari has multi-dimensional influence on Nepal lese culture. After Kumari is selected, she is kept in Sinhasan of goddess, and she even never touches the ground floor. She is clothed in red scarlet clothes and a third eye is painted on her forehead that is considered as the eye of wisdom. She has to live in isolation from her family and relatives in Kumari Baba where non-Hindus are also allowed to enter the courtyards but are not allowed to go up. After the study of virgin goddess worship in India and Nepal, Allen (1996) writes: As in Nepal the link between religious power of the goddess and the political power of the state was central to the growth and popularity of cult. But whereas in Nepalese tradition the idea of living Kumaris became institutionalized, in Bikaner after the original Karani Mata died; the cult has been perpetuated solely through the worship of an image of the goddess housed in a temple (p. 25). He further writes that Indian instance of Kumari puja differ from Nepalese culture. The beginning of Kumari cult dates back to the 13th century. There is evidence of virgin worship taking place in India for more than 2600 years. It appears to have taken a hold in Nepal in sixth century. There are several legends circulating about how the current cult of Kumari began. Most of the legends lead back to Jayprakash Malla, the last Malla king of Kathmandu. According to most popular legends, a red serpent reaches to the king's chambers late one night as he plays Tripasa game with the goddess Taleju. The king admires the surpassing beauty of Taleju, the patroness of his royal lineage realizing that her beauty surpasses that of his own life. As the goddess was able to read his thought, his thoughts were found. Taleju rebuked him for his lustful thought and declared that she would never appear again if king wanted to see her. It will be in the form of a low caste. Hoping to make amendation with his patroness, the king left the palace in

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search of the young girl. Even today a mother's dream of red serpent is believed to portend the elevation of her daughter to the position of Royal Kumari. And each year, the Nepalese king seeks the blessing of the Royal Kumari in the festival of Indra Jatra. Another legend of the origin of Kumari cult is more disturbing. According to this legend, the king Jay Prakash Malla had intercourse with a pre-pubescent girl who later died and then, the king was told in a dream to search for young incarnation of Taleju to make penance for his action; he must then worship the Kumari and ask for her blessing each year Bista (1998). Though these legends vary but one thing is that the virgin worship had begun during the rule of Jay Prakash Malla. Bista (1998), in his book *Peoples of Nepal* focusing on Indra Jatra writes, "Although the greater part of this festival is quite old, the Rath Jatra is said to have begun in the year 1756 A.D. during the rule of king Jay Prakash Malla" (p. 22). Another legend goes like this, a girl of Bare Caste was said to have been possessed by the goddess Kumari who claimed that she was the protector of Nepal valley, but she was vanished by the king. When the queen heard about it, she became enraged and insisted king to fetch the girl and install her as the living incarnation of Durga. Bista (1998) also believes in this legend and writes, "even since a girl representing Kumari has been worshipped" (p. 10). All the ritual that functions, which we conduct respectively, are based on our act or the participation. We not only conduct functions to fulfill the responsibilities but also it has some purpose of celebration by being together with family members, relatives, and neighborhood in brotherhood way. Together whatever the function we conduct, are based on our performance, which might be either script centric or the body centric. Similarly, the tradition of worshipping Kumari is also a cultural ritual which is performed based on either script or. body. The girl who is to become Royal Kumari must possess several qualities. She should pass several tests held by tantric priests. She should be Buddhist from the Newar Shakya caste of silver or goldsmiths. She must be excellent in health, free from any disfigurement. She must be a virgin with an unblemished body, never have shed blood and must not have lost any teeth. Some still required perfections are: neck like a conch shell, a body like banyan tree, eyelashes like a cow, thighs like a deer, chest like a lion, voice soft and clear like a duck, dainty hands and feet. Only the girl who possess these are chosen as Royal Kumari and worshipped as living virgin goddess (Bajracharya, 2005).

The negative side of Kumari tradition is that Kumaris are deprived of education and socialization in normal conditions. So, this tradition seems to be a political of patriarchal society to give continuity of female exploitation through rituals. The concept of virginity is also the problematic aspect, scars in the body is also the problem. The virginity is defined from the orthodox religious point of view, which is quite different from modern scientific view. The virgin goddess or Kumari has no freedom as the concept of goddess use to be rather, she is strictly kept in temple. She is treated just like an image of goddess made up of a clay, a stable mute an idol that does not speak. She is made as an object of circus rather than a goddess. She is deprived of her parent's love.

Turner (2008) in his article, "Liminality and Communities" States that "liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (p. 89). The tradition shows that Jatras are not only fixed, anyone can participate on it and function their rituals. This Kumari worshipping tradition is not only body centric but also script centric. Although Kumari tradition is inherent in Newar community of Kathmandu valley and most of them are Buddhist, her worship is done by both Hindus and Buddhists people with great respect and veneration. Respect and devotion of both Hindus and Buddhists people towards Kumari worship represents a symbol of cultural unity in Nepalese society. In this regard, Kumari tradition can be interpreted as a unifying force that integrates multi-dimensional

religious and socio-cultural sentiment thereby performing unity in diversity. Both Hindu and Buddhist epics have described Kumari as the incarnation of almighty one and she is called by different names in accordance to her different manifestation. Buddhist Newar call her by the name of Taleju, Vajradevi, Ajima etc. whereas Hindu legends take her as Durga, Kali and Kumari. Whatever the name she has given, she has significant role in Nepalese tradition.

Most of the researches that have been done about Kumari tradition focuses on the unique practices and rituals related to the tradition. The researches have praised Kumari cult giving it a national importance. Manandhar (2004) writes in the *Journal of Nepalese studies*, in the following way:

About Kumari, who represents the eternal fecundity along with the statehood of Nepal, the writer aptly writes that nowhere is the bond between Hinduism and Buddhism more clearly demonstrated than in the concept of Kumari . . . she is the symbol of the eternal motherhood which gives birth to everything in the universe (p. 45)

It makes clear about simultaneous religious faith that Kumari tradition manifests beyond the orthodox boundaries between Buddhism and Hinduism. Kumari is also respected as the symbol of purity and virginity. Even a short glance of Kumari to her devotee is said to elevate the human soul and attainment of power. Emphasizing on the importance of Kumari, Allen (1996) writes:

The Devi may also be worshipped in human form and when that occurs it is her purity as a young virgin woman that most likely to be stressed. The girl who becomes a living form of the Devi must be herself literally y a Kumari, i.e., a virgin girl uncontaminated by any kind of impurity, whilst as the Devi, she is formally addressed as kumari, the daughter of Shiva and half- brother to Ganesha (p. 2).

The worship of Kumari is therefore the symbol of unity and purity. Jatras and festivals of Kathmandu implicitly play the role of uniting force of heterogeneous society where people manifest their feeling of oneness. The Kumari centers on Jatras and is celebrated by all people of Hindu and Buddhist religions with equal respect and veneration. The presence of this goddess Kumari is required on many auspicious occasions and ceremonies. On the occasion of Seto Matsyendranath's bathing ceremony that is held in Jana Bahal, Kumari is taken to watch the purificatory rites. She is carried into the courtyard on the shoulder of the male attendant and placed on a seat on the corner of the temple, verandha. She is also required on Ghode Jatra. Similarly in the beginning of Indra Jatra too, she is required.

Kumari is widely based on performative sense and meaning. As Kumari is supposed to be a living Goddess, Kumari blesses on the devotees with sprinkling of pure water for their peace, longevity, prosperity and happiness. In return, even the devotees prostrate on to the feet of the Goddess Kumari with devotion and dedication. In addition, Kumari is decorated with ritual customs and looks, and placed at Kumari Ghar right after carrying in chariot as a performative way.

CONCLUSION

The Goddess Kumari is known as the living divine body based on the Hindu legend in the Hindu religion. Kumari -the virgin pure girl regarded as the Goddess Durga has a deep connection with Hindu myth. In the myth, the Goddess Durga stands for truth, justice, power and victory as showering grace and bless up on her devotees. Similarly, the story of the kings in regard to their gambling and interest on ancient time marks to the importance of Kumari. The

legend manifests hopes, aspiration and belief towards the Kumari Goddess on behalf of King's support and grip. It relates to the legend and power to govern on the people. It is believed that the divine power can punish the bad deeds and rewards the good deeds of human beings in the ritual viewpoints. Since Kumari is a powerful and dynamic living Goddess for protection and bless on its devotees, it is ever ending phenomenon as a ritual performance in the community. The 'rituals' includes verbal charms, benedictions or blessing in the stipulated place and action, such as touching, hugging or tying to the body with devotion which directly hint to the performative theory and activity.

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