



THE 7-YEAR-OLD 'kumari' of Patan sits on her throne, with her feet on a copper plate to avoid contact with the ground, May 7. In Nepal, kumaris are revered as living embodiments of the Hindu goddess Durga. PHOTO: SIMON DE TREY-WHITE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

# *Kumaris: The Temporary Child-Goddesses of Nepal*

After the earthquake, the young girls embody both tradition and change in a wounded nation

By JESSE PESTA

Like many college students, Chanira Bajracharya isn't sure what to major in. Maybe finance, she says, or business.

Either way, it will be a departure from what she did before. For 10 years, Ms. Bajracharya was a child-goddess — a "kumari," one of Nepal's most important deities and the living embodiment of Durga, the Hindu goddess of strength and protection.

Ms. Bajracharya also embodies something else: a changing Nepal, as the country confronts the aftermath of the recent earthquake, its deadliest natural disaster in generations.

Until a few years ago, Ms. Bajracharya

served as one of Nepal's deeply revered child-goddesses, in the town of Patan, near Kathmandu. Kumaris are chosen by Hindu holy men after carefully considering the zodiac, testing the child's fearlessness and determining whether she possesses 32 symbolic perfections, like "The eyes of a cow" and "body like a banyan tree."

A kumari serves until puberty. Then she retires and must try to become just another teenager. That is a tall order.

Kumaris live a pampered life. Though they typically remain under their parents' care, they sometimes move into the historic homes where their predecessors have resided. They are worshiped and





A view of the Kumari Ghar (kumari's house) in Kathmandu, with rubble and timber from damaged buildings piled up in front, May 7. The kumari sits behind the golden window. PHOTO: SIMON DE TREY-WHITE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

ride in golden chariots through adoring crowds — if they are not being carried by their minders. Ms. Bajracharya says that when she retired, at age 15, she had been carried so much that she first had to learn how to walk properly.

A complication of kumaris' lives after retirement is that some Nepalese still cling to the notion that a man who marries one will die young. "In my first year of university, I've not told them that I was

an ex-goddess," says Ms. Bajracharya, 19, sitting in her living room beneath a photograph of herself from the goddess years. "I wanted to see how people actually behaved with normal people," she says.

The practice has its detractors. A few years ago, Nepal's Supreme Court ruled against a claim that it violates human rights. But the court did suggest, among other things, that the government provide assistance to ex-kumaris "deprived of their fundamental right" to childhood education.

Nepal's kumari tradition is particularly significant now, given the destruction wrought by the magnitude 7.8 earthquake that struck on April 25 and its weeks of aftershocks. At least 8,500 people have died. Homes and villages lie in ruins across the Himalayan nation.

In historic central Kathmandu — amid collapsed temples, crumbling palaces and the tents of the newly homeless — the local kumari's home stands mostly intact. That fact hasn't been lost on the faithful.

"The kumari is great," says Ekaram Prajapati, a 53-year-old shopkeeper, visiting recently to pray. "Power resides in her, so the house stayed safe."



Sanuchhori Dangal, 43, descends the steps from a kumari's house after delivering a religious food offering on a copper plate, Kathmandu, Nepal, May 7. PHOTO: SIMON DE TREY-WHITE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL





Chanira Bajracharya, a retired kumari, in her living room in Patan, Nepal, before a portrait of herself during her time as the local kumari. PHOTO: JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Prajapati approaches the kumari's ornate, carved wooden door, touches his forehead reverently to the door frame and recites a short prayer for peace of mind.

Sanuchhori Dangal steps out of the door. She represents tradition. Her job is to deliver blessed food — fruits, rice, lentils — for the kumari from a nearby temple. Ms. Dangal must make the walk barefoot, and she is not to be touched en route. “We are all alive now because of the blessings of the goddess,” says Ms. Dangal, 43.

Yet she expresses an expansive view of the kumari's modernizing role. “Change is necessary, but the faith remains the same,” she says. “A human who is a god is different than a stone statue,” she says. “Later, she can be a doctor or engineer.”

That is a break from the past. Most of the retired kumaris Ms. Bajracharya knows have little formal education, she says. Ms. Bajracharya received tutoring during her years as kumari, as did her predecessor, but before that, schooling was the exception. In the past, she says, people felt that nobody was qualified to teach a kumari — after all, she's a goddess.

“Perhaps I was the first kumari playing with computers,” Ms. Bajracharya says. Afternoon light streams into her living room through a traditional, carved-wood Nepali window that looks out onto a bustling street.

One kumari superstition is fading. Downstairs from Ms. Bajracharya's apartment, in a clothing shop memorably named “Ants In Row For Fashion Greed,” the 22-year-old shopkeeper knows that a retired kumari lives upstairs. He doesn't believe the bit about men dying young if they marry a kumari, and he applauds her personal goals. “If she progresses in her studies, then she'll be a millionaire,” says the shopkeeper, Sachin Shakya.

Ms. Bajracharya isn't the first retired kumari to pursue higher education. Rashmila Shakya, the 32-year-old former kumari of Kathmandu, got her master's degree a few years ago from Kathmandu's Lord Buddha Academy. Today she is helping to build an app store for one of Nepal's cellphone providers.

Three months ago, Ms. Shakya was wed in a traditional arranged marriage. Finding the right man took time. Even as the old beliefs fade, she says, some men still





Ms. Bajracharya's father straightens a photograph in his living room that shows his daughter when she was the kumari of the village of Patan. PHOTO: JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"Don't want to marry an ex-Kumari." But isn't that their loss? She laughs at that and says, "Maybe not from his point of view!"

To visit the sitting kumari of Patan, one passes through a low wooden door, ascends a narrow staircase and emerges into a small antechamber — the kumari's toy room. The kumari is, after all, 7 years old.

Her favorite toy is Barbie, according to Biphasha, the young goddess's 13-year-old sister. The kumari of Patan loves flowers, drawing and the dramatic eye makeup that is one of a kumari's defining features. But sometimes, her big sister says, the kumari asks, "Do my friends miss me?"

In a prayer chamber just off the toy room, the kumari sits on a small throne. She looks grumpy. "She hasn't had lunch yet," her father says, sitting near her on a worn red carpet.

Her father says that he never learned to read, and he wants his two daughters to succeed. "Biphasha wants to be a doctor, and the younger one" — the kumari — "I'd like her to go into banking," he says. "But she likes painting and art."

He strongly supports schooling for kumaris. So does Biphasha. Sitting quietly as her father talks, she blurts out, "It can be an inspiration for normal people."

Her father agrees: Other parents can tell their own kids, "Even the goddess has to study, so why don't you?" The kumari is getting fidgety, so her father picks her up and carries her back to the toy room.

Ms. Bajracharya, the retired-kumari-turned-finance-student, says that her strongest class at Kathmandu University is math, but she is also fascinated with psychology. That could reflect her own unique perspective on human behavior, she says, having been worshiped as a child-goddess.

A few years ago, Nepal's king — once himself worshiped as an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu — lost the throne in Nepal's stormy move toward democracy. Now earthquakes plague the country. Shortly, the monsoon season will begin.

Through it all, the kumari endures, says Ms. Bajracharya. "The kumari is the center of hope," she says.

*Chandiraj Dahal contributed to this article.*