

## THE LIVING GODDESS OF BHAKTAPUR LOSES HER JOB

In 1999 I took eight students to Nepal for a one-month intensive study of Hinduism and Buddhism. We spent the first night in the sacred city of Bhatkapur just outside Kathmandu. Because of jetlag, we were all up before dawn and we had breakfast overlooking the main city square.

We sat there in awe and wonder as the city's residents—women, big sisters carrying a sibling, gangs of boys, and men in both western and native dress—all paid their respects at the temples on the square. (All bets that the men in suits would not perform puja were lost.) They touched their heads, their most sacred areas, and then placed the same hand at the foot of the goddess temple.

Ten-year-old Sajani Shakya, the living embodiment of that goddess, visited Washington, D.C. this month to promote a British film on the living goddesses of Nepal. Because of their belief that foreign travel makes one impure, some Hindu and Buddhist priests in Bhatkapur have declared that Sajani can no longer hold the office of living goddess.

During our 1999 study tour a local guide made arrangements for us to visit the Amita Shakya, royal kumari of Kathmandu. (Kumari means virgin girl.) We stood for the longest time in the courtyard of her palace as the guide pleaded with the goddess' guardian standing on the balcony. We could hear some serious children's play in the background. Suddenly, the goddess appeared for a very brief wave and quickly rejoined her boisterous playmates.

The royal goddess' feet never touch the ground, and she is allowed to go outside her palace only once a year. At that time she tours the city in a grand procession that includes her royal attendants and members of her extended family.

I returned to Nepal in the fall of 1999 just in time to document this spectacle. It was difficult to get any good pictures of Amita Shakya because men covered her chariot like a swarm of bees. Interestingly enough, no women were participating and male priests control everything dealing with the goddess cult.

Goddess worship in South Asia goes back at least 2,500 years, but the cult of the royal goddess of Kathmandu was initiated by Hindu King Jaya Prakash Malla in the 18th

Century. The goddess was so intimate with the king that they played a game of dice every evening. One night the king made some sexual advances, and as punishment the goddesses withdrew and declared that she would now appear only as a Buddhist virgin girl.

Each year the Hindu kings of Nepal, considered to be incarnations of the Hindu God Vishnu, must visit the goddess' palace and receive her blessing, because the sovereignty of the nation lies with her and not with the king. One year the goddess placed the tika, a sacred mark just above the middle of the eyebrows, on the crown prince rather than the king himself. The kumari's act proved prophetic because the king died later than year.

The living goddesses of Nepal come from the Buddha's own clan, the Shakyas, so all the kumaris have the surname Shakya. They are chosen by a procedure very similar to that of the Dalai Lama. The real kumari must have signs of physical and spiritual perfection, and she must pass a terrifying test of mental and emotional endurance.

A new royal kumari, Preeti Shakya, was chosen in 2001, and she is currently withholding her services over a dispute over distribution of substantial tourist contributions that flow into her palace every day. The goddess did give the traditional blessing to King Gayanendra when he ascended the throne after the crown prince shot his father and six other family members in 2001.

Gayanendra, however, is now disgraced because he abolished Parliament and shut down the press in response to the threat of a Maoist insurgency. A new prime minister now takes his place at religious festivals and that means that Gayanendra will not get his annual blessing this year. Indeed, an upcoming vote on a new constitution may abolish the monarchy and many royal properties have already been expropriated.

When I was first in Kathmandu in 1992, I experienced the congestion caused by tens of thousands of Nepalis standing in line to have a personal audience with then King Birendra on his birthday. This year only 1,000 people were present to celebrate Gayanendra's birthday, Birendra's brother.

The end of the monarchy may also mean the demise of the kumari tradition. Women's rights activists have also petitioned Nepal's Supreme Court to abolish this sacred office, but conservatives have filed a counter claim stating that living goddesses are an integral part of Nepal's religious tradition and that it is a matter of religious freedom.

Each goddess' tenure ends when she has her period, or becomes impure by any other means. Former kumaris receive about \$80 per month from the government. There is a legend that any man who marries a kumari will experience a premature death, but of the 12 royal kumaris since 1932, nine of them have married and have had a total of 23 children.

Rasmilla Shakya ruled as the royal kumari from 1984-1991, and after a difficult transition, she now has a degree in information technology. She was put off by another royal kumari whom she visited briefly: "I saw her sitting in her room, quietly, all made-up the way we used to be at the Kumari House. She still believed she was a goddess," she says. "I told myself this is not the way I am going to spend the rest of my life." You go, former goddess!

The conflict between human rights and traditional religion is one of the most serious problems in our world today. It will be very interesting to see how the Nepalis solve this dilemma.