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Worship of Virginity in Kumari Tradition: A Female Exploitation

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Recommendation Letter

Mr. Gopal Basnet has completed his thesis entitled “Worship of Virginity in Kumari Tradition: A Female Exploitation”, under my supervision. He carried out his research from date 2065/03/28 to 2065/08/10. I hereby recommend his thesis be submitted for vive voice.

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Approval Letter

This thesis entitled *Worship of Virginity in Kumari Tradition: A Female Exploitation*, submitted at the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University by Gopal Basnet, has been approved by the undersigned members of research committee.

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Abstract

Human society and culture consist of norms, values, customs, traditions, religion and many other socially constructed concepts that distinguish one society from the other. The uniqueness and specific identity of a community depends on its particular cultural practices that are supposed to be practised in order to maintain social cohesion, integrity and harmony. Kumari tradition bears a paramount importance in Nepalese culture of Kathmandu and it is directly linked to the political system of Nepal, firstly to the kingship and later to the presidential rule of Nepal. Kumari, who is worshipped as the living goddess, is a pre-pubescent girl of three or four years old and she is worshipped as a goddess until she reaches to puberty or bleeding from any parts of her body. After that she becomes a mortal and retires from Kumari house.

There are eleven Kumaris in Kathmandu valley but this research is mainly concerned with Kathmandu Royal Kumari. Unlike other Kumaris, Kathmandu Royal Kumari is denied freedom to go outside the temple except during some festivals and jattras in the name of tradition. She does not have the chances of living with family and going school with her mates. Though Kumari is an innocent girl, she is deified and worshipped for her purity, virginity and divinity at the cost of her potentialities and female identity. So this research focuses on the exploitation of female in the cult of Kumari from the view point of feminism.

Culturally deification of human child is not negative rite but the confinement and superstition prevalent in society about ex-Kumari are not negligible aspect for her future life. Such male dominated ideology inherent in Kumari tradition exposes the exploitation of women by patriarchy by means of tradition and rituals.

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Introduction

I. Kumari: Virgin Goddess of Nepal

The worship of Kumari or "Virgin Goddess", is one of the unique traditions 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 until she reaches puberty, as the living incarnation of powerful deity, Kali. The Kumari who is worshiped as the Living Goddess in Kathmandu is a small girl who lives in beautiful palace with exquisitely carved wooden window called the palace of Kumari. Her deification and worship continues until she gets menstruation or any bleeding from her body takes place. When a Kumari retires after her puberty, another one is chosen and continuity of Kumari worship is given. There are several Kumaris including Kumaris in Kathmadu, Patan, Bhaktapur and Bungamati within the Kathmandu Valley. However, among all of them, the Kumari of Kathmandu housed in the Kumari Bihar situated at the vicinity of Hanuman Dhoka palace at Basantapur is regarded as the most important one and known as Royal Kumari. It is believed that as a female deity, Kumari possesses Shakti (power). Both benevolent and fearful, she is worshipped as Kali, Durga, Taleju etc. Kumari, as the living virgin goddess in Kathmandu must be from Shakya family. Ratna Bir Tamrakar, explaining about the compulsion of Shakya clan in Kumari tradition in an article of *The Kathmandu Post*, writes that "the whole concept of Kumari as 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 was established"(10).

Worship of virgin Goddess or Kumari has earned a wide fame because of its unique tradition. It is taken as cultural identity of Nepalese people. Especially in

Newar community, Kumaris have significant position as living goddess. Even after their retirement Kumaris are worshipped and respected as goddesses. Kumaris are given high respect as goddess. Kumaris are given high respect and dignity especially during social and religious functions. During the festival of Indra-Jatra, Kumari is put on a chariot and pulled through the streets of the City. On the occasion of Rath-Jatra and Kumari Puja, Nepalese Kings worshiped her as their Isthadevi (Personal deity) and receive blessing to conduct national affairs. Kumari worship is equally significant cultural heritage and symbol of unity for both Hindus and Buddhists of Nepal.

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. Emphasizing on the significance of Kumari tradition, Ratna Bir Tamrakar writes that "if Kumari tradition is to vanish from our culture it will indeed be a great piety. Not only will our culture be so much the poor but there will be less to show to the numerous foreign tourists who come to Nepal attracted by our rich cultural traditions" (10).

In Nepal, the living goddess Kumari is regarded as a Supreme Tantric goddess, a common deity of Hindus and Buddhist. While, Hindu tantrics worship her as Durga Bhawani or Taleju, Buddhist Tantrics worship her as Vajradevi. Siddhi Bir Ranjitkar in his review of the book, *Kumari: The Virgin Goddess* by Narayan Prasad Shrestha criticizes the misinterpretation of Kumari tradition. He writes "the Newars of Nepal devote a great deal of their devotion and ritual activity to the worship of the most notable and unique feature of their religion is the worship of Kumari, the living virgin goddess"(4). He further emphasizes the importance of Kumari worship taking it as invaluable cultural heritage of Nepal and need to preserve it.

Among the eleven Kumaris of Kathmandu the Royal Kumari of Durbar Square has got much respect and dignity. Each year, she is worshipped by kings of Nepal to receive blessing and power. So worship of virgin goddess has multi-dimensional influence on Nepalese culture. After a Kumari is selected she is kept in sinhasan of goddess, and she never have to touch the ground floor by her feet until her position of goddess ends. She is clothed in red scarlet clothes and a third eye is painted on her forehead which is considered as the eye of wisdom. She has to live in isolation from her family and relatives in Kumari Bahal where non-Hindus are allowed to enter the courtyards but may not go up. She usually acknowledges greetings from her balcony windows. After the study of virgin Goddess worship in India and Nepal, Michel Allen concludes that virgin worship in Kumari tradition is quite different from Indian culture. In his book, *The Cult of Kumari: Virgin Worship in Nepal* he 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. (25)

He further writes that Indian instance of Kumari puja differ from Nepalese counterpart because virginal forms of Devi in little girls are recognized for short duration but Nepalese Kumaris are long lasting living goddesses.

The beginning of Kumari cult date back to the thirteenth century. There is evidence of virgin worship taking place in India for more than 2600 years. It appears to have taken hold in Nepal in sixth century. There are several legends circulating

about how the current cult of Kumari began. Most of the legends however, lead back to king Jayaprakash Malla, the last Nepalese king of Malla dynasty. According to the 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 begins to admire the surpassing beauty of Taleju, the patroness of his royal lineage realizing that her beauty surpasses that of his own wife. 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 and if king wanted to see her it will be in the form of young girl from a low caste. Hoping to make amends with his patroness, the king left the palace in search of the young girl possessed by Taleju's spirit. 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, king Jayaprakash Malla had intercourse with a pre-pubescent girl who later died as a result. 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. Though there are many legends about the origin of the cult of Kumari worship, these legends agree that the virgin worship had began during the reign of Jayaprakash Malla. Dor Bahadur Bista, in his book *Peoples of Nepal* focusing on Indra Jatra writes that "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 reign of king Jaya Prakash Malla" (22). He prefers the third legend as reliable origin of Kumari tradition. According to it, during the reign of Jaya Prakash Malla, 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 banished 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 writes: "even since a girl representing Kumari has been worshipped" (Newar- 10). There are numerous tales some in written form of Vamsavalis and other transmitted orally in which a king of that city is represented as having so offended Taleju that she refused to have anything further to do with him directly but instead would maintain contact in the form of a young virgin of the Shakya caste.

The girl who is to become Royal Kumari must possess several qualities. She should pass several tests held by Tantric priests. Five Buddhist Tantric priests are appointed to select a virgin goddess, Kumari after preceding Kumari's virginity is lost. Besides them, the Pancha Buddha, the Bada Guraju or Chief Royal priest, Achajau the priest of Taleju and Royal astrologers are also involved in selection process. Eligible girls are Buddhists from the Newar Shakya caste of silver or goldsmiths. She must be in excellent 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. Girls who pass these basic eligibility requirements are examined for thirty two perfections of a goddess. Some of these 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 as of a duck's, black hair and eyes, dainty hands and feet, small and well-recessed sexual organs, a set of forty teeth and many more. They must be courageous and pass examination conducted in Hanuman Dhoka Durbar square which involves terrible scene of Darkness and piercing cries. Only the girl who passes these exams are chosen as Royal Kumari and worshipped as living virgin goddess.

Though Kumari is believed to possess power of goddess and worshipped as the living incarnation of powerful Hindu deity Kali, she is powerless. After deification, she is not allowed to go anywhere beyond her room. Since the concept of God and Goddess is concept of omnipotence and omnipresence Kumari worship seems to be contradictory and problematic. Both Hindu and Buddhist and their different sects worship goddesses as symbol of power. In the Shakta sect of Hindu mother goddess is identified as energy K. L. Vaidya's book *Cultural Heritage of Himalaya* interprets Shakti as the primary source of creation and cosmos is but her child. He writes: "the eternal energy and natural ability to give and feed life make woman superior to man" (10). He is right to some extent in the sense that Hindus worship Kali as the destroyer of demon Mahisasura who was a threat even to the great God Shiva. Especially, during Dasain festival Hindu people worship different goddess for Shakti (power) in which Kumari is worshipped as a goddess but she is not given freedom of a goddess. She is defied only to exploit by patriarchal myth of virgin. Kumari tradition of deifying a girl appears to be another version of implicit victimization and subordination of female.

Although Hindu mythology gives dignity and respect to the goddesses and people worshipped their images as the cosmic power controlling the universe, women are treated as obstacle in the way of Moksha or Nirvana. This paradox and contradictory orthodox concept of goddess and concept of women clearly shows the ambiguity inherent in Hindu culture and society. On the one hand a virgin female is deified and worshipped as Kumari, incarnation of Kali, Durga and Taleju on the other hand they are subordinated as the second sex. Moreover, Kumaris are deprived of education and socialization in normal conditions. So this tradition seems to be a politics of patriarchal society to give continuity of female exploitation through rituals.

The *Christian Science Monitor*, a magazine has published about controversy of Kumari tradition in this way: "receiving goddess treatment in this Himalayan country is not always as good as it may sound. The tradition of isolation and worshipping pre-pubescent girl as living goddess - a practice that dates back century among Nepal's Newar community- has recently been controversial" (3). Citing the experience of an ex-Kumari, it focuses on the exploitation of child in Kumari tradition.

The concept of virginity is another problematic issue inherent in Kumari cult. It is defined from orthodox religious point of view, which is quite different from modern scientific view. "Kumari", etymologically means a girl who is not yet menstruated or a pre-pubescent girl. *Medical Dictionary* defines virginity in relation to hymen which particularly closes the mouth of vagina. "It is a delicate membrane stretching over the entrance of vagina. Some women have large hole in hymen and some do not have any. Generally when a young girl has her first intercourse the hymen is stretched and may rupture to bleed. But it could be torn during play games, cycling, swimming etc" (328). So, it is myth that an intact hymen means that girl is virgin because on repeated intercourse also hymen may remain intact. In Kumari tradition a girl is deified in terms of virginity but the criteria of measurement is farcical one. Satis Shroff, in his comment on *The Living Goddess Kumari* writes "in Kumari tradition, a goddess does not bleed. In case she does, naturally at puberty or earlier through a fall and subsequent injury, she becomes a mortal" (10). So virginity in Kumari is deified in terms of bleeding from any parts of body and such virgin girl is defied and worshipped. They are termed as Kanya. Even today Pancha Kanya's presence in any occasion is believed to be of great success to achieve intended goals.

Virginity of Kumari is tested by Tantric priests rather than by a physician. Shroff explains that "the priest touches six parts of the Kumari's body with a bunch of

grass: the vulva, labia majoris, the navel, the breast and throat. This ritual is meant to transform the body of the mortal girl to that of a godly one” (12). Furthermore the quest for the so-called thirty two specified perfection in a girl is quite unusual. These perfections are created myths that have nothing to do with a mortal girl. But they are forcefully imposed in Kumari tradition. Certainly, these instinct commodifies woman because they are found only in constructed images of deity. This quest of Battis Lakshan in woman is deeply rooted in Hindu society which subordinates females by encouraging them to be attractive and docile. Their identity and success are measured on the basis of appearance rather than their abilities and potentialities. Search for pure femininity is only a myth constructed by patriarchal society that ignores woman and treats as sub-human being. This search of pure feminine traits in Kumari as well as in other women indicates the quest for object of pleasure rather than quest for goddess.

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 clay, a stable mute idol that does not speak she is made an object of circus rather than a goddess, where many people come to see her and enjoy. She is deprived of her parents love. The isolation from parents and society certainly brings difficulty of assimilation after retirement of Kumari. As a child she is deprived of family love and sentiment as well as proper education in school. For the compensation, the government of Nepal has provided a little amount of money as pension. But what to do with the money? Her future remains uncertain when she retires after puberty. In Newar society, there is a superstitious myth that ex-goddess brings bad luck to her husband who marries her. This is more dehumanizing myth created by patriarchal culture that discourages and denies Kumari a happy familial life. As she is not favored

by society, a Kumari becomes psychologically weak and she is doomed to prove patriarchal myth of inferiority and subordinate position of a woman. Colin Simpson in his book *Katmandu* writes "An ex-Kumari is nobody's bride. True Kumari Devi retires at puberty with considerable emoluments of office. She goes back to her village with enough money and jeweleries to form of a dowry that could attract the most eligible young bachelors for miles around but it doesn't " (20). Kumaris are cheated of marriage and motherhood as she is cheated of childhood. Because of these exploitations during and after the worship, Kumari tradition implicitly and explicitly displays a ritualistic sin over females in the name of religion. It is a human crime to deify a girl worshipping her as goddess and to assign a devilish characteristic to the same girl after her virginity is lost.

The concept of making goddess to a human girl is also equally problematic. Many religions have their goddess but they are divine themselves and these goddesses are worshipped in the form of images in temples but Kumari is mortal human being, though she is worshipped as the incarnation of great goddess Kali, Durga or Taleju. In the Nirvana Tantra the gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are said to arise from her like bubbles from the sea. David Kingsley discusses about fierce appearance of goddess Durga or Kali in his book *Hindu Goddess*. He writes:

It is she who brings Shiva within the sphere of domesticity and who with her soft glances, urges him to moderate the destructive aspect of his Tandava dance. Kali is Shiva's 'Other' wife as it were provoking him and encouraging him in his mad, anti-social often disruptive habits. It is never Kali who tames Shiva who must becalm Kali. She is at home outside the normal order and seems to be unbounded by that order. (122)

Most of the goddess in Hindu or other religions are born out of divine forces and they are omnipotent and omnipresent. But Kumari, the living goddess is only a unique goddess who is divinized by human beings (priests) and worshipped by her equal human counterpart. The worship of a human being rather than a god in Kumari worship is paradoxical.

Although, a human being can never be a divine force and immortal, it is forcefully imposed in Kumari goddess. Certainly, she dies one day physically but Kumari never dies because her immortality is granted by replacing Kumari in her childhood. In reality the goddess Kumari is nobody except a human being. So, worship of virgin goddess in Kumari tradition is worship of human being. But because of inherent exploitation regulated through cultural values and superstitions, Kumari, the virgin goddess, is doomed to suffer badly in societies after her retirement when she becomes mortal from divinized goddess.

II. Kumari: A Symbol of Femininity

Feminine traits of Kumari are of paramount importance in Kumari tradition than Kumari herself. Her identity as a “virgin goddess” is determined on the basis of traditional, conservative and superficial criteria established by patriarchal society. Looking for evangelic beauty and charm in a four or five years old girl is quite unnatural that implicitly encourages women to surrender before the so-called feminine traits that further empowers society to subordinate women through ritual practices. Kumari as a goddess does not have any godly power but the power of her beauty and virginity are supposed to possess the power to destroy the evil power that may take place in Kingdom. Feminine qualities are preferred from the beginning of the selection of Kumari. After selection by Bada Guraju, she is brought to the king who pays brief homage and then she returns to Kumari house. The priest first purifies the girl’s naked body of all previous life experience. He does so by reciting appropriate mantras whilst touching the six sensitive parts of her body with the sanctified items. These six parts are eyes, vulva, vagina, navel, breasts and throat that are named as ajnakhya, muladhara, svadisthana, manipura, anahata and visuddha respectively in Sanskrit.

The history of Kumari cult clearly shows that it was established as a tradition by Kings only to avoid the danger that was suggested in the dream. So, Kumari tradition is what Simon de Beauvoir calls “myth” which is constructed and regulated in society to subjugate women continuously. In her book *The Second Sex* Beauvoir insists against “the cultural identification of women as merely the negative object or

'other' to man as the defining and dominating subject who is assumed to represent humanity in general" (qtd. in Abrams 88). She argues that one is not born but rather becomes a woman. "It is civilization as a whole that produces the creature which is described as feminine" (89). She also attacks the patriarchal myth of woman presuming the female essence prior to individual existence. She opines that "female are free to chose to come out of void but patriarchy regards woman as other, weaker sex. Women are considered absolutely as the "essential other" (90). Male is considered as subject who, assuming to represent the humanity in general, treats women as commodities. In fact male and female, the gender concept is created by patriarchal society.

The myth of women plays a considerable part in literature and culture in which women are perceived to be immanent, passive, static, terrestrial, limited, inferior, mysterious, flesh etc. Beauvoir claims that patriarchy takes these qualities of women as alterior to women's existence. Through these myths, tradition and the rituals are constructed by which female are suppressed in society to "second sex".

The great epics of most of the religions depict women as an inferior race. In the narrative parts of epic they are mentioned among other auspicious objects such as maiden. The women depicted in Hindu Epics Mahabharata and Ramayana are passive, and they are admired for their beauty and dedication to husbands. Those who respect their male counterpart are said to be wise rather than their knowledge. Sita, Parvati, Draupdi, Tara, Ahilya etc. are extreme examples of female representation in society. Moreover, apsaras are constructed to entertain king of heaven, Indra. Shakambari Jayal have discussed about the position of women in Vedic era by analyzing the representation of female in the epics. In the epics kings are warned

against women who are mentioned among vices created out of intoxication. In her book *Status of Women in the Epics*, she writes:

There are many examples in the epics that indicate the position of women in general and of wife in particular as a piece of property. This notion about women has existed from the hoary past. It was also reflected in the Rakshasa and the Ausra forms of marriage. The enumeration of women along with gold and gems, their being considered as an object of enjoyment, also as property to be utilized in difficulties, all point out the same conclusion. (243)

The dependence of woman is preferred with great importance in the didactic portion of Mahabharata. "It is clearly stated that women can enjoy the wealth given to them by husbands but have no rights of giving it away i.e. they have no proprietary rights over it" (244).

In order to be a Kumari, the female candidates have to be three or four years old and must fulfill a row of conditions that have been set down in the scriptures as the list of thirty two signs: The virgin has to have well proportioned hands, and feet like those of a duck. She must have beautifully formed heels and possess circular lines on the sales of her dainty feet. Her body has to have the form of saptachha leaf. Her cheeks and bossom must resemble that of a lion. The nape of her neck, and throat like a conch from the Ocean. She must have forty well-formed, white teeth. The tongue must be small, wet and sensitive. Her voice must resemble that of a sparrow. The eye and eye-lashed, like those of the holy cow. Her shadow has to be beautiful and golden hued. The hair has to be smooth, black and has to fall to the right side. Her hand, feet and long toes have to be soft and small. She must have round shoulders and long arms. The body of Kumari has to be flawless, sans peck marks, and a skin with well-

formed pores. She must have a round head with a high forehead. Resistant bodies, well-formed like the nyagrodha tree.

These instincts are what the mythology considers to be compulsory element for a female. The demureness is accepted as the perfection of women regardless of her intellectual aspect. Such measurement of female body in holy scripture is nothing more than a patriarchal quest for pure femininity to make them dependent, inferior and secondary and weaker other sex.

The patriarchal domination constructed through myths and epics are regulated by means of traditions and rituals. Kumari, the virgin goddess is no other than object of pleasure whose measurement as a goddess is measured on the basis of menstruation. Biologically menstruation is a natural process but it is taken as defilement in Kumari cult. She is confined within the walls of tradition, deprived of freedom and education that furthers the economic dependence in future life. Education, a fundamental right of child is denied in her school age and her development of selfhood is delayed, her personal identity as a human being is dissolved in the form of goddess only to be repressed forever. As Kumari is an innocent child, feminine qualities must be possessed by women is implanted in her psychology. This repression and subordination of female is exercised by means of tradition and rituals that are supposed to bear cosmic values thereby presenting Kumari as a symbol of femininity.

Kumari as a goddess is an ideological construct of patriarchal society. Culture and traditions are established as the integral parts of society but these traditions manifest the dominant ideology of oppressor, hence in Marx's concept ideology is created and regulated in society by those who are in power position. Traditional patriarchal concept of female inferiority and their confinement is regulated by Kumari

tradition. The conservative and constructed myth is legitimized in society through many institutions and is considered as natural. Devaki Jain discusses about the chain of institutions that help to formulate female in inferiority to men. In her essay *The Household Trap: Report on a Field Survey of Female Activity Patterns*, she writes:

The link between myth, methodologies and reality is obvious. The myth pervades the perception of both men and women, the perception gives values to the activities, and the methodology depends on the values and presents the reality in formulations which further strengthen the myths. Apart from reporting this fact, they also perceive these activities as having less value which indeed is how society perceives them. (410)

Jain clearly shows the institutional practices as the weapons through which females are subordinated implicitly or explicitly in patriarchal societies. The link between many elements of cultural practices form a method to exploit women further.

Social norms and traditions are political and ideological construction of the then societies that manifest the power and method of controlling the minorities. Reinhard Bendix also supports the fact of legitimizing domination constructed by patriarchy in her essay, *Patriarchy and their Household, Traditional Domination*:

Legitimation of traditional domination occurs wherever the authorities claim obedience on the basis of established usages and same authorities do this at least some of the time in every historical constellation. In contrast to the charismatic leadership, traditional domination is as routine as the father's authority over his household, after which it is modeled. (322)

She, further writes that “personal subjection and filial piety remain intact, the masters will prevail, and custom obliges the dependants to aid him with all the means at their disposal”(334). Even where the ordinary services and fees of the dependants are limited by tradition, the master is entitled to make arbitrary and unilateral demands whenever it suits his whims or interests, because the traditional limits upon demands are ill formed.

Legitimation of Kumari tradition in Newari culture also follows the same pattern of construction and imposition. In ancient pre-Hindu India, as in many other ancient civilizations, mother-goddesses were evidently venerated in a most direct manner both for their fertility and their reproductivity. Images of the goddess depict her as heavy with pregnancy and the association between human and agricultural fertility is made abundantly clear in texts such as the Rigveda. Allen, Michael, in the book, *Cult of Kumari* writes:

The designation of Kumari as a post-menstrual girl is more interesting in view of emphasis placed on menstruation as a certain sign for the disqualification of the Newar Living Kumaris. In overt terms, the living Kumari is first and foremost a pre-menstrual girl, yet perhaps in some inner sense that parallels her underlying sexuality and maternity, she is really post-menstrual. The fact that her stipulated color in clothes, tika mark and flower is red supports such a view. (83)

Kumari is not only worshipped as a goddess, but also outcasted, assigning evil qualities after her menstruation. There is a popular beliefs in Newar society that ex-goddess brings bad luck to those who marries her. This dichotomy of instincts constructed in Kumari tradition reveals the ambivalence inherent in Newari culture.

Because of such superstition Kumari's future is dreaded in society and she has to live in fear of potential happening in course of household.

Menstruation of Kumari is taken as descending symptoms after which she no longer remains a goddess. Not only in Kumari tradition but also many Hindu and Muslim culture take it as defilement. There has been a feeling of contamination and impurity for every waste of product of the human body. Thus, it seems led to the belief that "woman was contaminated, impure and was to be avoided during the menstrual period and child birth. It thus resulted in the seclusion of women during puberty all over the world and periodical segregation of women thereafter"(Jayal-226).

Patricia Jeffery had studied Pirzada, a Muslim community women. According to her, menstruation in Pirzada Muslim community is considered a pollution. Menstrual pollution reflects degradation of women and their separation from men in their culture. In her book, *Frogs in a Well, Indian Women in Purdah*, she concludes that "menstrual pollution, then, seem to have something to do with male superiority and with the separation between the sexes"(114).she further shows the ideological subordination of women as follows:

To a large extent, people cannot select out elements of their culture to internalize. The taken –for –granted world comes as a package, and individuals have little freedom to pick and choose or to accept and reject. The women have been confronted with and have internalized elements of a culture which simultaneously devalues them and elevates them. On the one hand, in the complex form of modesty behavior, avoidance and diffidence and in the pollution of menstruation and childbirth, attention is drawn to their inferiority, to their difference and

lack of power to their separation from the world of men and to the dirtiness which being female entails. On the other hand, the culture internalized has its benefits as well as it costs. [...] and yet even these positive elements contain their own ambiguities and shadows. (114-115)

The same ambiguities and contradictions are inherent in Nepali culture that simultaneously worships and devalues women. On the one hand female deities are worshipped as powerful goddess substituting in living girls in the form of Kumari, on the other hand females are considered as the obstacle in the way to heaven. These norms are emphasized in the ancient great narratives of Hindu religion, that is continuously operating in societies and women are othered.

Teresa L. Ebert criticizes patriarchal construction and operation of tradition in society thereby portraying how male ideology functions in society to subordinate women. In her essay, *The Romance of Patriarchy: Ideology, Subjectivity, and Postmodern Feminism Cultural Theory* she writes about popular narrative:

They are primary sites for the ideological construction of individual as gendered subject, especially female ones in male-dominated heterosexual couples. By producing the female subjects as complemented and completed by her relation to male partner patriarchy naturalizes sexual identity, masking the cultural construction of the feminine, thereby continually reproducing women in a subordinate position. (19)

She further defines patriarchy as the organization and division of all practices and signification in culture in terms of gender and the privileging of one gender over the other giving control over female sexuality, fertility and labor. “While seemingly

universal, the particular structure of patriarchy at any given moment is always historically determined since it is formed in conjunction with a specific social formation and its dominating mode of production" (20).

Kumari tradition cannot be an exception in its origin and practice. It is a mode of female subordination through ritual practices that confines women within the line of femininity depriving their education and empowerment to enhance independence. In the surface form, Kumaris are worshipped as the goddesses but implicitly they are exploited in many aspect of her life. Socialization, which takes place in her family and community is impossible in seclusion that further deteriorate her position in society. But the society is blind to see this difficulty under which Kumari have to live rather the tradition is enjoyed as having a great importance. It is just a politics of patriarchal society that subordinates women denying her any position in social affairs.

Kumari and Women's Human Rights

Human right is the burning issue of modern world that asserts the fact that all human beings are equal and they should be treated equally along with the equality and equity in every sphere of society. Life, liberty and pursuit of happiness are considered to be unalienable individual rights of people. The universal declaration of Human Rights, created in 1948 A.D. and international body of laws, was meant to protect the integrity and dignity of human beings. Today, many national and international agencies are established in many countries to watch violence against human rights. Violence against women is defined broadly as any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or liberty deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or private life.

Sally Engle Merry, in her essay, *Women, Violence and the Human Rights*, defines violence against women on following way:

Conceptualizing violence against women as a human rights violation typically means demanding changes in local cultural practices concerning sexuality marriage and family. Women's vulnerability to violence depends on entrenched socio cultural practices involving marriage, work and religious and secular ideologies of masculinity and femininity. Convention on the rights of women typically require states that ratify them to change cultural practices that subordinate women. (90)

The international law of human rights denies any kind of discrimination based on gender, sex, race and many more. NGOs and INGOs working in the fields of human right, has emphasized that women's rights, must also be defined as being seen and treated as equal in the political and ideological as well as domestic and private arenas. Marjorie Agosin emphasizes on women's participation in every sphere of society to create a society based on equality. In her introduction to the book *Women Gender and Human Rights*, she writes:

The participation of women in the political and the social realm allows for delegitimizing discrimination against women and achieving genuine equality-not only under the law. It also affects individual cultures that previously denied women the possibility of education and confined them to a world of silence". Conventional international human rights must also be understood as a way of truly living and participating to the worlds without physical or psychological coercion. (1-2)

She further criticizes the traditional view of human rights that recognize and define human rights in terms of male model and pattern of thinking because "they fail to take issues of health and reproductive freedom which are often matter of life and death into separate account" (2).

In the context of society and culture, modern feminists and human rights activist have raised their voice against orthodox religion and ritual practices. Western feminists and activists have criticized Muslim culture and subordination of women relatively more than other. Recently, Kumari cult has been drawn into the debate of human rights. Most critics and activists have focused on child rights violation in Kumari tradition. Kumari the innocent girl is deified and confined in Kumari house depriving fundamental child rights of education and socialization. She is deprived of parental love and affection. Kumari tradition has drawn attention widely not only because of its uniqueness but also because of its blind practice neglecting the child rights. Jenny Dublin brings forth the debate of Kumari in *Nepali Times* weekly of 30 September. 2004:

In September 2002, MP Bidhya Devi Bhandari took a public stand against the Kumari tradition during a press conference. She urged that the tradition be abolished: "This is violation not only of the rights of the child but of women's and human rights." She said, "The girl is isolated from her normal society and after a number of years when she begins to bleed she is thrown out. It is not only traumatizing, it is psychologically damaging for a child to be forced to shift between these two worlds. (4)

The human rights activists have strongly denied any traditions that subjugate women and deprive of personal identity. Kumari tradition denies freedom of speech,

education and potential abilities of Kumari. Further it damages her future through the superstition that her fate brings death to her husband. The infringement of women's right is usually exercised in the name of tradition, religion, social cohesion, morality or some complex of transcendental values. Always it is justified in the name of culture.

Mahnaz Afkhami's perceptive essay *Gender Apartheid, Cultural Relativism and Women's Human Rights in Muslim Society*, addresses women's human rights within the diverse communities of Muslim world which are applicable in Kumari cult too. She question why cannot a Muslim woman have the right to determine and organize her own life? Why is that a cleric has the right to place a woman within the boundaries? Afkhami rejects the notion that he derives this authority from God, from a text or from a tradition. Further she argues that the relativist discourse on human rights essentially universal rights, has been manipulated by Islamists to appear as a from of cultural imperialism. She further concludes:

It is important to note that the status of women in society-social, political, legal, economical-has been fundamentally the same across history for a majority of world's population. Except for surface differences in manner and style, the basic arrangements for division of labor and power between men and women have been the same across the world. (235)

Gender apartheid is clearly defined in all laws and regulation pertaining to the role of women within the private and public spheres.

Inheritance, dowry, guardianship, personal and professional boundaries and other rules that limit women's space and movements are all worked out so that women's dependent and separate sphere is justified, protected and perpetuated.

“Within this construct women do not have rights as defined in international documents of rights; rather they have privileges that issue from the narrative epics like Quran and the Sharia and supported by folklore and myth” (237).

Dr. Mohini Chatterjee also asserts to dissolve male-centered tradition. In her essay, *Feminism and Women's Rights* writes that as a mother, sister, daughter or wife the role of the women in the development of a human being's personality in particular and growth and progress of society cannot be either denied or undeveloped. “But for centuries man, that is the male of species had kept her under his thumb, allowing her own development to stagnate. He treated her like property and she lived her life under the domination of her man, even if she was ill treated, abused or tortured" (preface). Similarly Kumari tradition is also institutionalized, even the government appoints administrative staffs without considering it as an institutionalized violence against women's rights. Chatterjee writes:

History, as a record of male leadership, has been used perhaps subconsciously to reinforce the idea that women are insignificant and subordinate and therefore belong to the private sphere. Especially in societies where literacy is low and women's organizations are apolitical male dominated history and traditions maintain the existing social and political order. (15)

It is clear that cultural practices like Kumari are constructed by patriarchal point of view that have nothing to do with the progress of state except implicit violation of women's rights. Their right of developing self-identity and progress of future career are restricted by keeping them in seclusion from the normal society. Though they are retired at puberty, it is already delayed to develop her personality and career. The government has provided the small amount of pension for the retired Kumari as a

compensation which is nothing for her future life. Rather she is cheated of happiness of life due to prevailing superstition about Kumari.

Many Nepalese women have raised voices against Kumari tradition demanding at least to modify the restrictive rules of Kumari cult. Pun Devi Maharjan had filed a document in opposition to Kumari tradition in Baishakh 23 of 2062 BS. in the Supreme Court. She complained against the violation of child rights in Kumari tradition of keeping an innocent child in restrictions deprived of many fundamental rights. Quoting Maharjan's complaint Puskar Mathema writes in *Yuwamanch Monthly* of Asoj 2064:

Advocating on the behalf of child rights she says that if Kumari Tradition is continued it will dismiss the fundamental rights as well the freedom of the children established, as a Kumari granted by constitution and provisioned by child rights treaty. Apart from this it will leave negative impact in their physical and mental development. (My Translation 5)

But again, against her complaint, Dr. Chunda Bajracharya had filed a complaint in Supreme Court defending Kumari tradition, claiming that Kumaris are not exploited rather they are respected as the living goddess. He had argued that Kumari tradition is related to Nepali national culture and identification of Nepalese unique tradition and therefore should be preserved along with the modification that is necessary. Further he had commented that it is not appropriate to raise the voice against dissolution of Kumari tradition because law has also given authorities to every Nepalese people to protect and respect their culture. After that, still the Supreme Court has not confiscated the issue.

Whatever the defendant and opposition group argue there is a ritual violence against women practiced by Kumari tradition. The recent feminists have criticized the tradition as a means of exploiting female. They defend the female identity against the patriarchal representation of women, as a second sex, inferior, passive, object to be enjoyed by males. Kumari has restriction to go anywhere as per the necessity. When Sajani Shakya, a Kumari went to U.S. on a 39 days trip to attend the screening of a BBC documentary about her life, some priests handled by Jaya Prasad Regmi, demanded that she be declared mortal and thus no longer a Kumari because a goddess is not allowed to go abroad-across Kala pani. “ There is obviously a power play between the orthodox priests on the one hand, and the democratic, neo-ethnic federalists, human rights activists, feminists and the Maoists on the other hand”(shroff-12). Whereas the priests are trying to prevent the undermining of their ancient rights and privileges as mediators between the Gods and humans, there is an increasing commercialization of the revered but poor Living Goddess by the western media.

The recent cultural feminist theories critique such violence and domination to construct female identity. Kumaris are worshipped for their beauty and virginity at the cost of their self, individual identity. She is represented by patriarchal society and her identity and future is predetermined thereby denying her self-existence. Because beauty is linked with femininity, the influence of body image on self-concept is greater for females than male. Her body and its structure is emphasized which strengthens the patriarchal view of female as ‘flesh’. In our culture, prevailing notion of beauty emphasize being young, thin, white, and Anglo-Saxon. Rita Freedman, in her essay, *The Myth in the Mirror*, discusses the condition of women, their images and realities in society that makes them to view their self from other’s point of view:

A woman is more likely than a male to equate herself with what she looks like or what she thinks she looks like or what she believes others think she looks like. Studies show that women's self-concepts are correlated with their own perception of their attractiveness whereas men's self-concepts relate more closely to perceptions of their effectiveness and their physical fitness. (8)

It consists of the belief that women must possess an immutable quality "beauty" in order to be successful and attractive to men. In essence, femininity is equated with beauty. Our culture is permeated by the conviction that beauty is a central measure of women's worth.

In fact standards of beauty vary from culture to culture and have changed radically over time. Rita Freedman shows us that the 'beauty myth' is a corollary of images of female inferiority by demanding that women's worth be measured by this superficial quality, society negates the potential equality that can exist between men and women. In fact Freedman suggests that in "a society that equally values men and women, women will gain power and shift beauty off the back of femininity" (12). Feminist critics have urged to interrogate such patriarchal norms and traditions to achieve their identity as human beings. Through culture and traditions, patriarchal society obliges females to complicit with their interests. Teresa L. Ebert asserts that "only by interrogating the ideological production and circulation of gender it is possible to begin to change the social, economic, and power relations among individuals and in society" (19). It is obvious that, through Kumari tradition patriarchal ideology has prevented females from their fundamental rights by simply giving them false assurance of divinity.

The cult of Kumari has demonstrated the age-old repression of women in male dominated socio-cultural structure. Women are restricted and confined within the claustrophobic patriarchal social setting which is a stumbling block for their independence. Thus, feminists' voice against ritual violence against women rights is to enhance the separate human identity of female in human society. Most of the Nepalese feminists and human rights activists have now began to question the social institution and rituals that commodify females as the object to be enjoyed. The recent revolutions against the tradition of Pancha Kanya and Miss Nepal are burning examples of feminism and human rights. They have questioned the commercialization and commodification of female body in the name of traditions that denies female's self- identity and independence thereby praising their beauty at the cost of their potentialities. Nepal has signed in the every treaty documents of United Nation that promises eradication of violence against women in the name of culture. Thus the government of Nepal should modify Kumari tradition thereby giving freedom to the Kumari otherwise it provides a continuous basis for generating female domination.

Although, orthodox Hindu and Buddhist people as well as some nationalist sociologists and anthropologists defend Kumari tradition taking it as an unique tradition, its drawbacks are not negligible. Since the function of tradition in society is to sustain integration and harmony among social systems, it must not marginalize one group of society to acquire its value. Kumari, the goddess is eulogized and highlighted as the incarnation of great goddess Kali but in practice she is exploited from the beginning to the end of her life. After she retires from the goddess, she becomes not only mortal, her dead life begins in society. She loses her identity of human being when the tradition assigns her evil qualities. She is obliged to live a meaningless life deprived of happy living, economic independence and self-identity.

III. Kumari: A Cultural Icon of Nepalese Society

From the beginning, Kumari is worshipped as the Isthadevi (Personal deity) of Nepalese king. She is worshipped as the living incarnation of great goddess of energy, Kali. On the occasion of Indra Jatra, Nepalese kings used to worship her and receive blessings to rule the nation and maintain the rules and order in the kingdom. King as the head of nation, worshipped the virgin goddess Kumari. But after the political changes in Nepal, Kumari tradition has been drawn into the debate. As the political parties of Nepal including the then rebel Maoist dethroned king Gyanendra, Prime Minister had worshipped Kumari as the representative of the state during transition period. In this respect, many sociologist and anthropologists have argued that Kumari is worshipped not by individual king rather by an individual who rules the nation. Anthropologist Dr. Chunda Bajracharya has emphasized that Kumari worship is related to political system rather than to the kingship as hereditary power. The king is the ruler and it could even be a simple individual elected by people to rule.

Similarly, the chief of 25th Rath Yatra, Pabitra Bajracharya emphasizes to take the word 'king' as the representative of government. He further says that "though kingship has come to an end, the position of government representative can not end. So it is necessary to interpret Kumari tradition with changed political context (Mathema 6). The debate about Kumari tradition and exclusion of Kingship in Nepal has come to an end after the first president of Federal Republic of Nepal, Dr. Ramvaran Yadav attended on the occasion of Indra Jatra of 2065 BS. as the chief of government. Along with the political changes and transformation of Nepal from kingdom to republic, the continuity of Kumari tradition is maintained taking her as the "living goddess" of Nepal relating it to the political system of Nepal.

Although, Kumari tradition is inherent in Newar community of Kathmandu Valley and most of them are Buddhist, her worship is done by both Hindu and Buddhist people with great respect and devotion. Nepalese kings are Hindu but they used to worship Kumari as their Isthadevi. Even after the political transformation of Nepal from kingdom to republic, president Ramvaran Yadav's worship of Kumari as the representative of the state indicates Kumari to be a national goddess. Respect and devotion of both Hindu and Buddhist people toward Kumari worship represents a symbol of cultural unity of Nepalese society. In this respect, Kumari, the living goddess of Nepal can be interpreted as an uniting 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 people call her by the name of Taleju, Vajradevi, Ajima, Vairabi etc. whereas Hindu legends take her as Durga, Kali and Kumari. Whatever the name she is given, she is worshipped for power and well being by both Hindu and Buddhist people. Female deities have significant place in ancient scriptures and they are worshipped in both fierce and calm manifestation. Sacrifice to the goddesses differs according to their function in the cosmos that the legend has assigned them.

Most of the researches that have been done about Kumari tradition focuses on the unique practices and rituals related to the tradition. The researchers have praised Kumari cult giving it a national importance. Reviewing on the book written by Narayan Prasad Shrestha, Tri Ratna Manandhar writes in the *Journal of Nepalese Studies*, in 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.(45)

It makes clear about simultaneous religious faith that Kumari tradition manifest beyond the orthodox boundaries between Buddhism and Hinduism.

From the religious and cultural aspect, Kumari, the virgin living goddess is seen as cultural icon not only of Newar community but also of all Nepalese people. Many festivals and jatras that are celebrated in Kathmandu valley bear the great importance of Kumari. Taleju is taken as the great goddess in Newar society, whose incarnation is said to be Kumari. From the beginning of valley kingdom, all of the Kathmandu valley's kings had worshipped Taleju as the deity of power. Bronwen Bledsoe, in his essay, *An Advertised Secret: The Goddess Taleju and the King of Kathmandu*, presents the attraction toward vakti of goddess practiced by Pratap Malla, a great poet of Malla period. He shows the powerless feeling of king before the goddess with reference to king's poem, *Sarvaparadhastotra* in the following way:

The king calls himself feeble-minded, yet he gives voice to keen sensibilities and in poised and polished Sanskrit verse. Speaking to the goddess, he calls himself a child, yet his signature epithets outside the poem proper address mortals in proud and magisterial tone [...] with regard to the goddess, the king is all humility; with regard to men, he is all majesty. As he serves, so should he be served. (192)

The king had fear of goddess so he served her with great devotion and in return demanded equal service from people with the deity. In this way, the king who had

been supposed to be an incarnation of God Vishnu was too destined to worship the deity Taleju and her incarnation Kumari for the power.

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 purity of Kumari Michael Allen writes:

The Devi may also be worshipped in human form and when that occurs it is her purity as a young virgin women that most likely to be stressed. The girl who becomes a living form of the Devi must be herself literally 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 Siva and half-brother to Ganesa. (2)

Worship of Kumari also shows the fondness of Newar people toward purity in human life. It is most especially amongst the Newar people of Kathmandu valley that Kumari worship has been elevated to the level of a national cult of major importance. Despite the fact that Kumari's personal life is full of dreary, she is respected institutionally with great dignity and social pride. Her ritual exploitation is covered with divine garb of a deity.

Writing about the Indra Jatra of 2065 B.S. Gyanendra Bibas highlights on the social importance of Kumari. In his article *Indrajatra Without King*, published in Gorkhapatra National daily of Bhadra 28, he focuses on the feeling of unity performed by people during the festival and placed Kumari in the position of respective deity of Kathmandu:

Sri-Kumari is taken as the common deity of Kantipur inhabitants. The Kantipur city is the state of Kumari and Kumari jatra is traditional indigenous ritual of the city. This Jatra teaches us to remain alert in the

context of modern society. Similarly it motivates people to co-operate in every work with changing time. It develops the feeling of unity and teaches about how unity could be maintained for the betterment of society. It gives the message of punishment in wrong activities from gods to mortals. (My translation, 9)

Jatras and festivals of Kathmandu implicitly play the role of uniting force of heterogeneous society where people manifest their feeling of oneness. The Kumari centered Jatras are celebrated by all people of Hindu and Buddhist religions with equal respect and such common respect carries ethos of social and national unity.

Religious Respect and Social Status of Kumari

From the Hindu point of view, after a pre pubescent girl becomes Kumari, the young girl is supposed to be fully infused with the spirit of Taleju Bhavani. Though Hind and Budhists do not dispute the belief that Kumari is a virginal form of Taleju, she is nevertheless for Newars more importantly identified with Vajradevi, the chief female divinity of Vajrayana Buddhism.

The presence of Kathmandu Royal Kumari is required in many auspicious religious ceremonies, of each year. On the occasion of Seto Matsyendranath's bathing ceremony that is held in Jana Bahal in the early January, virgin goddess is taken to watch the purificatory rite. She is carried into the courtyard on the shoulder of a male attendant and placed on a seat at the corner of the temple verandah. At this time, she not only views washing of Seto Matsyendranath but also gets worshipped by numerous devotees. On Mila Punhi, the beginning of the full moon day of Magh which is known as Swasthani purnima by Hindus, the God Narayan is carried from his temple Changu Narayan Bhaktapur to Hanuman Dhoka, Kathmandu. On this

occasion, Kumari, the virgin goddess is carried out by her attendants to welcome the god Narayana.

Ghode Jatra, the festival of horses which falls around the late March also requires the presence of Kumari. On the twelfth day of waxing moon in Bhadra, the day of pole raising outside of Hanuman Dhoka, is another occasion to carry the goddess Kumari outside of the temple. This day marks the beginning of Indra Jatra. Kumari, accompanied by Ganesh and Bhairava is taken to Mucuka to be worshipped by the Achaju priest in charge of Taleju temple. Two days later, Kumari Jatra begins when thousands of people gather in the square before Kumari house. Three huge and ancient chariots, one for Kumari and other two for her male attendants Bhairava and Ganesh are pulled through the street. This Jatra is celebrated with magnificent enjoyment. Army band, political leaders, local dignitaries march with musical bands in front of her chariot. Thousand of people and tourists watch the Jatra with great interest. Wearing all the most splendid jewelry and surrounded by male members of her guthi she sits in a beautifully decorated temple on the chariot from where she blesses all the watching devotees.

On the fifth day or waxing moon of Asoj, Kumari come out to greet Pachali Bhairava at the gate of Hanuman Dhoka. Pachali Bhairav is one of the powerful and respected gods of Kathmandu valley. Beyond these especial religious occasion, Kumari is not allowed to go anywhere except the temple. Most of the informant were found unknown about the reason why Kumari should be present at these particular ceremonies. Some people are of the opinion that as the living forms of Taleju Bhavani and hence the confidant of kings she is required to be present whenever deities are brought to the palace gates.

After the installation of a new Kathmandu Royal Kumari, the old is required to remain indoor in her parents' home for four days during which people may come to worship her. The members of her family look after her and on the fourth day two Jyapu (middle-ranking farmer caste of Newar) women worship Kumari. The girl then is required to remove all of her Kumari clothing and jewelries. She is not allowed to keep valuable items that she wears during Kumari. These jewelries belong to the institutionalized position, not to individual incumbents. She is then regarded as an ordinary human being, a member of her family rather than divine incarnation. But "inevitably there are likely to be difficulties both for others to accept her as an ordinary human and for the girl herself to adjust to the radically new role required of her" (Allen 26). Kumari's transformation from a deity to mortal being really brings obstacles in her life. For a considerable number of formative years she has been treated as a powerful goddess and worshiped by everyone, even the king.

As Kumari is appointed in her childhood and kept in seclusion, she is deprived of the chances of normal socialization that results into the dullness of understanding about social affairs. She cannot understand and realize about sorrow and happiness. Moreover, she remains ignorant about what society demands from her as a woman after her retirement. Clearly, a prolonged period of this kind of lifestyle does not constitute the ideal socialization for a future Newar wife. "Although the position of Newar women, whether as mothers, wives, sisters, or daughters, is, distinctly better than that of most neighboring Himalayan or Indian women, it is still quite emphatically one in which service and obedience, especially to fathers and husbands is the Keynote" (Allen 27). After she remains no longer Kumari, the young goddess must suffer the indignity of menstrual seclusion. Then as soon as she marries, she should enter the most difficult phase as the young women who is obliged to serve and

worship even her husband. Despite annual bow of kings to her feet, she must then do so daily to her husband.

The reversal of Kumari's role from goddess, the destroyer of demon to a suppressed, an ordinary woman generates humiliating feelings in her life. The life being served and the life to serve expose the illusion of religious and social role she has to play in the world. Michael Allen had taken interview with some of the ex Royal Kumaries. He has come to the occlusion that most of the Kumaris are dissatisfied with Kumari tradition and they dislike to prefer their daughter for upcoming Kumari. Despite the great religious respect, they had expressed dissatisfaction to the confinement within the temple, denying education and superstition about Kumari prevailing in Nepalese Newar society.

There is a widespread belief that marriage to an ex-Royal Kumari may prove somewhat hazardous for any but the strongest of men. This is the most powerful hidden superstitious tale that deserts her dream to be an ideal humble wife to her husband. Newar people believe that the ex-Kumari still retain something of Devi's destructive power, of which burning evident is ex-Kumari are addressed as *Dyah Meiju*, deity female. They believe that this lingering divine essence is so powerful that it may even kill a weak husband, hence the risk for an ex-Kumari of early widowhood. Furthermore, some people believe that snake originate from the vaginas of ex-Kumari and devour men having intercourse. Such superstitions places Kumari in limbo in which she neither gains previous position of divinity nor she is counted and viewed as a general human being.

Kumari's childhood ends without any formal education to enhance the hope of bright future. A further consequences of her status as a goddess is that she is officially expected to be omniscient and therefore in no need of any kind of education or

training. Though perhaps this was no great disadvantage to the girl in her later life, it is today recognized that it can be a serious handicap when most of her caste peers aspire to gaining professional qualifications at college or university level. After a long debate and struggle of feminists and human right activists, the supreme court of Nepal has granted the right of education for all Kumaris in 2065 B.S. A post report, *All Kumaris Entitled to Child Rights: Apex Court*, published in The Kathmandu Post reports:

The Supreme Court said that all Kumaris can enjoy children's right at par with other children. "There are no historic and religious documents that say Kumaris should be denied their child rights granted in the convention on the rights of child", the court said in a judgment upholding the rights of the living goddess. (1)

Now, there is a little hope of improving Kumaris status together with her role as a goddess and a human child. But the ex-Kumaris are not fully convinced about the implementation of Supreme Court's decision because cultural and legal norms are two different domains of human society, one based on world human affairs and the other on the particular community that carries religious sentiments. Religion and law do not collaborate all the time. So, they suspect the implementation of court's decision.

Psychological Effects of Kumari Tradition

Psychological Development of every human being plays an important role in the growth and development of personality. It is an internal force that grows confidence in every steps of life and enhances self-identity and individuality.

Psychologically, Kumari tradition has an adverse effect in the lives of Kumari. During childhood, they are secluded from the family and house that result in various hazardous effects of childhood. Kumari, the small girl is carried in many religious

ceremonies that are fearful to a child. This is one of the many reasons for child rights activists to speak against the tradition. Furthermore, the girl is closed in a dark Room for a moment where she have to hear a piercing cry to test her courage. Such practices are dangerous in the development of sound psychology in a child. There is no coherence between raring the child in Kumari cult and in a normal familial environment of house.

The priest touches many parts of her organs to test her virginity which could be a humiliating practice for a grown-up woman. Her beauty and vigorous looking is emphasized to the extent of making her fond of beauty at the cost of potentialities. Kumaris are implicitly exploited psychologically in various stages of life. At first she is deprived of her family and normal childhood development that might bring a lifelong negative impact. Such deprivation of normal socialization is seen as the cause of weakness in achieving success in future. On the one hand, the society in which she lives assigns an inferior position to men, on the other hand no programmes of empowerment is brought and conducted for Kumaris. Instead, she is deprived of many things that are essential to empower a human being for further living.

The adolescent phase of Kumari's life also ends without any meaningful achievement. After her menacre, when she returns to her house, it is already delayed for schooling. The age in which most of her counterparts study in secondary level, she have to begin her school. Adolescent phase is taken as the phase of personality building in which adolescents prepare a plan for future life of prosperity. As she begins her school in adolescent age, she has to join her class with younger children that generate frustration in the study. This is one of the many causes that most ex-Kumaris are not well educated. They do not show any interest in the study and parents also do not encourage as they are goddesses.

Rashmila Shakya, a residents of Kwahiti, is only one of the ex-Royal Kumaris who is holding job in information technology and thinks herself as an independent female. Defending Kumari tradition, she says that it is a unique tradition to introduce Nepal in the world and need to preserve. Though she had to face some difficulties she does not blame the tradition for it. Difficulties are individual and natural for her rather than cultural. While talking about exploitation, she denies to blame culture. Individual struggle and will are important and responsible for capacity building rather than tradition. But most of former Kumaris are not educated and independent like her. Women's rights activists and child rights workers deny to generalize Kumari tradition as an impartial ritual practice only from the study of one ex-Kumari because most former Kumaris are dependent, have not received any remarkable academic degree. Rashmila opines that the issue of academic achievement depends on family environment too. Her parents had encouraged her in every way to her study and now she is an independent.

The superstition prevalent about ex-Kumari is another remarkable obstacle that deteriorates her social status unconsciously. According to the mythical belief, ex-Kumari bears evil qualities hence they are harmful to marry. Though most of ex-Kumaris are married, they are viewed in the same way. When an ex-Kumari marries, she has to live her marital life with the fear of potential happening to her husband. Bhagawati Joshi, a social worker says that such superstition created by society disqualifies ex-Kumari to marry. For her, arrange marriage, which is preferred in Nepalese culture becomes difficult because no all male candidates understand the false superstition. She prefers to eradicate such norms that create difficulties in Kumari's life thereby preserving national culture. Rashmila shyakya also accepts such

superstition as the created myth of society and appeals to believe in individual's self rather than lingering after superstition.

The double role of Kumari, as a goddess in childhood and as a human being after puberty also brings explicit difficulties. The world of goddess is mythical one that teaches her to be passive in social aspect because everything in Kumari house depends on her will. As a goddess, she remains as an object of decoration in the temple where she pleases her devotees. On the other hand daily toiletry of Kumari implants the sense of beauty as an important fact of life thereby encouraging her to be attractive and docile. Rashmila says that the required attributes of Kumari meant to be different from other general human being. For her, if there remains no difference, there is no value of the object. But the differentiation practiced in Kumari tradition implicitly expose masculine ethos thereby emphasizing feminine qualities.

Whatever a deity may be, every deity is pure symbol in factual sense. This means the usual relationship of symbol to object is reversed. Most symbols represent something external they are shorthand forms of communication about the objects' perceived qualities. In case of deities, however, perceived qualities proceed from communication and not from the object itself. Gods are whatever human being say they are. Thus, human beings create symbol of symbols and learn to respond them as if they were realities. The evil traits assigned to ex-Kumaris are a form of communication regulated in society to subordinate women to inferior position.

When Kumari have to change her role from goddess to a normal human being, the illusion of divinity generates difficulty of human life unconsciously. The obstacles and hindrances created by tradition are hidden abstract elements that continually challenge to the happiness in women's life in her society.

Anita Shakya, an ex-Kumari of 1918 to 1984, a resident of Sikamoobahal is only literate without any recommendable academic degree and shy of speaking to any stranger. She does not know about human rights and female exploitation. Though her parents send her school, she did not well in study and finally dropped her study. Her younger brother expects her to be an outstanding and forward sister but he does not comment for her behavior and says that she is respected. His statement clearly shows that she is only respected as a goddess at the cost of her social advancement. Such practices are found not only in Kumari tradition many other communities also praise women for their simplicity. Her younger brother, Ammar Ratna Shakya opines that Kumari tradition should not be blamed for the weaknesses of ex-Kumari and not all Kumaris are dependent. But his statement also bears the masculine ethos where except some Kumaris most of them are unknown outside their house. Teaching to a Kumari is not compulsory task rather it is her will.

In course of research, this researcher had tried to get information from the officials of Kumari Guthi. But the officials in charge of Kumari house denied to talk about the issue for they were threatened not to talk about the issue by senior officials. Briefly they told that Kumari tradition have brought a social and cultural debate. National and international medias have highlighted the negative aspect of tradition "which is nothing other than bringing indigenous cultural into debate", said an official. The debate inherent in Kumari tradition had made headline in many international Medias. Some religious authorities, especially orthodox Newars criticized the issue saying it was against the tradition, an attempt to end the originality of Nepalese culture.

Most of the ex-Royal Kumari s also deny to talk about exploitation inherent in Kumari tradition. They don't bring out the causes so some feminists guess that

institutional authority might have threatened not to talk about the issue because they might have fear of losing pension provided by Kumari Guthi. But Rashmi Shaky, an ex-Kumari denies such hypothesis and claims that no restriction is made by authorities rather these were false rumors. Bhagwati Joshi opines that Rashmi Shaky is an exception with regard to academic achievement. For her, all Kumaris can not be of same capacity. Moreover the environment of house and Kumari house must be encouraging to the girl which cannot be same always. "She had wise parents so she might have been encouraged to study but not all Kumaris belong to the same parents who encourage to educate their daughters regardless of age", says Joshi. She also does not speak against the tradition but her emphasis is to enhance independency to former Kumaris which is the task of government as well as Kumari Guthi. For her, empowerment of such ex-Kumari is possible and necessary in every way, only the implementation is hard due to politicalization of the issues. According to her, Kumaris should be given the amount collected in Kumari puja during the period of goddess. The pension is not sufficient to invest for her future activities and necessities. Economic empowerment plays important role to be independent women in future.

Most of the orthodox Newar people deny the cultural exploitation. Amar Ratna Shaky denies socio-cultural exploitation but accepts implicit economic exploitation of Kumari. He and Rashmi Shaky both agree that socio-economic empowerment belong to the individual will and capacity but the Kumaris who can not be independent or who are unable to achieve higher education, should be trained according to their individual interest that will help them to empower economically. The tradition bears our identity so it should be preserved according to the changing world.

Although the parents whose daughter is chosen as Kumari are supposed to be fortunate, now they dislike to prefer their daughter for upcoming Kumari. Advocates of child rights and women's right activist say that those who preferred their daughter also realized the negative impact of tradition after her retirement because they had to face many difficulties to adjust the ex-goddess in the family. Jenny Dubin also mentions about parents attitude in her article, *To See a Divine Childhood*: "A generation ago, hundreds of parents would offer their daughter for Royal Kumari selection process considering the post of honor. But in 2001, when Royal caretakers went from house to house in Kathmandu looking for a prospective goddess, only five parents were willing to offer their daughter" (10).

This evidence clearly shows the disinterest of parents toward Kumari tradition mainly because of psychological weaknesses of ex-goddess caused by confinement without any chances of normal socialization and growth of mind.

Although some extremist Hindu and Budhists deny such hypothesis, it seems some what truth because avoiding the tradition of selecting a new Kumari from numerous candidates; a new Kumari was brought directly from her house and was deified in the selection of 2008. Witnesses say that there was no competition as it was in the past years. Despite the denial of extremist advocates of Kumari tradition the decreasing participation for competition to be Kumari shows the psychological impact of tradition.

Socio-economic Aspects of Kumari Tradition

Kumari tradition deserves the position of one of the unique tradition of the world. The international name and fame of Kumari cult has been a remarkable source of tourism development. It has positive effects in tourism sector. Though because of Kumari, the living goddess, the nation earns a large sum of money, Kumari's

individual life remains same always. After a long period of confinement Kumaris are returned without any valuable objects received by goddess as offering from her devotees.

Preeti Shakya, who reigned as living goddess from 2059 to 2065 B.S. had wept bitterly and denied to return to her house for many days during her retirement in 2065. The members of Kumari guthi interpreted her reaction as psychological fondness toward her position as a goddess and warm environment of Kumari house. But it was wrong interpretation to cover the drawbacks of tradition. The inhabitants of Maru Tole, adjacent to Kumari house deny such interpretation. They are of the opinion that Kumari were dissatisfied to return empty hand. Joshi also agrees that authorities returned her empty hands despite many objects offered to her. Furthermore, she opines that the valuable objects such as jewelries offered to Kumari should belong to her because these are offered to her rather than institution. For her, though Kumari spends her childhood in confinement at the cost of normal socialization and parental love, she should get at least some percentage of offered objects or equivalent.

Many national and international tourists come to visit and pay homage to the living goddess. Large sum of property is collected from devotees. Moreover in many Jatras and festivals of which central attraction is Sri-Kumari, remarkable donation is collected by Kumari guthi. But Kumari's personal life is not improved economically. Thus, many respondents agree that Kumari tradition has been a medium of income for government and Kumari guthi at the cost of poor economic status of Kumari's individual life.

The advocates of human rights, child rights and intellectuals also defend the tradition. In other word, all people defend Kumari tradition and show the need of preserving it, but their main disagreement is related to confining practice and

economic dependency of ex-Kumaris. Kumari is another version of Kali, another incarnation of Taleju but it is male-biased. This biasness and its burning example is her male counterparts, Ganesh and Bhairab. Ganesh and Bhairab are free to go school, but Kumari who is the most powerful goddess is restricted from school. They are representative of male deity and represent patriarchal ideology of male superiority over female. Though Kumari Guthi has appointed a tutor for Kumari, it is not sufficient, as it deprives her from normal socialization that takes place in school.

After the decision of supreme court to educate Kumaris and enhancement of child rights granted by international law in 2065 B.S., the human right activists and Nepalese feminists have praised the decision. Pun Devi Maharjan appreciates it as a success of human rights activist's struggle and expects its implementation in practice. Although the officials of Kumari Guthi deny that Kumaris are deprived of education since a tutor is appointed in Kumari house, it is not gradable according to prevalent measurement. It becomes clear from ex-Kumari Rashmila Shakya, when she denies it as an informal education but contrarily she had joined in grade two and had jumped to class four. Thus, education that is given in Kumari house should be equivalent to the measurement of government school, or Kumari, the living goddess should have the right to go to school.

Whatever the defendants and opposition groups say about Kumari tradition, most of them agree that the small sum of pension for ex-Kumari is not sufficient. In their opinion, the ex-Kumaris should get many facilities from the government to empower and enhance economic independence. Kumari is the only unique tradition of the world and needs to preserve. There are many things we can do for increasing income from tourism, but the negative aspects of tradition should be changed without losing its originality so we can prevent the wrong message of tradition.

Worship of Kumari, the living goddess is not only an identity of unique Nepalese culture but also something important to show the numerous tourists, who extend Nepalese cultural values and importance throughout the world. To stop the potential wrong message of culture, blind and orthodox practice should be changed along with modernization occurring throughout the world. Though some people deny changing fearing the loss of its originality, there would be no loss of such originality while making it impartial and it is the demand of modern Nepal with biasless cultural practice and secular thought, where every people have the rights to raise voices against the partial values prevalent in society.

IV. Conclusion

Kumari tradition, the worship of living virgin goddess manifests the dominant patriarchal ideology that implicitly exploits female in the name of tradition in one way or the other. The blind practice of such traditions is conducted without considering the hazardous effects in the lives of its participants and Kumari in particular. The present socio-cultural status of former Kumaris shows the negative impact of Kumari tradition. Though they had been worshipped as the virgin goddess by multitudes, most of Kumaris are unknown outside their home due to the lack of education, freedom and subordinated status of women in Newar society. The ex-Kumaris urges to change in accordance to the changing time in order to remove it from debates.

Kumari worship is a common ritual practice of Hindu and Buddhist community of Kathmandu and this tradition bears a national political importance. But such ritual practices do not bear the realities prescribed in religious epics. Religious legends prescribe one thing whereas advocates practice the other. In Hindu mysticism, the active principal in the universe is feminine. The great gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are also said to be passive but Shakti is responsible for their activity. These beliefs led to the concept of women as vigour and energy. In Shaivism, this power or energy includes the power of will, the power of wisdom and the power of action. The whole universe is said to be the emanation of Shakti and is without any form or qualities. She is the creator, preserver and the destroyer. As it is difficult to worship Shakti in an abstract form, she is endowed with various forms like benevolent, terrible and forbidding, typifying various aspects of deity. In Shaktism, Shakti is of a universal nature and of cosmic importance.

In Kumari tradition, Kumari is worshipped as an incarnation of great goddess of energy, Kali but she is powerless. Instead of creator, preserver and destroyer, she is

created object of patriarchy, preserved and represented by other and destroyed victim of patriarchal religion and culture. She deserves no cosmic power as described in great epics rather she becomes powerless, helpless creature without any personal identity thereby assimilating oppressed female role in society. Contrary to legend, Kumari, the goddess is confined denying her omnipotence and omnipresence. She is bound to the extreme patriarchal ideology that worships her as a goddess, denies her potentialities of goddess and ends the practice furthermore deteriorating her human life. At first, she is exploited ritually then she is cheated in social, economic and cultural spheres of human life. This twice and thrice victimization of Kumari as a goddess, mortal being and as a women in society brings forth the exploitation of female in the name of tradition.

The experience of Kumaris and attitude of intellectuals, feminists and human right activists shows Kumari tradition to be an institution, a means of patriarchal society to exploit women thereby giving false assurance of divinity. It manifests the patriarchal interests and ideology covering its false premises in the ritual garb of worshiping virginity and divinity.

The exploitation of women takes place indirectly in Kumari tradition that affects directly in Kumaris life. Psychologically they are made weaker since they have to play the double role, i.e. the role of a goddess and a human being. Furthermore, she has to perform the role of a woman in which the ex-goddess is assigned evil qualities that becomes a lifelong stumbling block to her potential capabilities. Thus, Kumari tradition is rooted on social and religious ground that incorporates the glorification of the myth of virgin goddess worship to be regulated by patriarchal interests to institutionalize female exploitation through rituals and tradition.

A society or community can not exist without its norms, values, customs, traditions and religion because these are compulsory elements to nurture and sustain the society. Their function is to enhance the socio-cultural unity and maintain the order and peace in society. Though Kumari tradition explicitly shows the Hindu – Buddhist cultural unity, it is male biased. It has not considered the negative impacts generated by blind orthodox practice in the social lives of individual Kumari.

Thus, to make the Kumari tradition harmonious and impartial national cult, it needs changes in its practice. Otherwise, Kumari tradition remains a patriarchal cult rather than unique national tradition thereby being a means to exploit females continuously in Nepalese society.

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