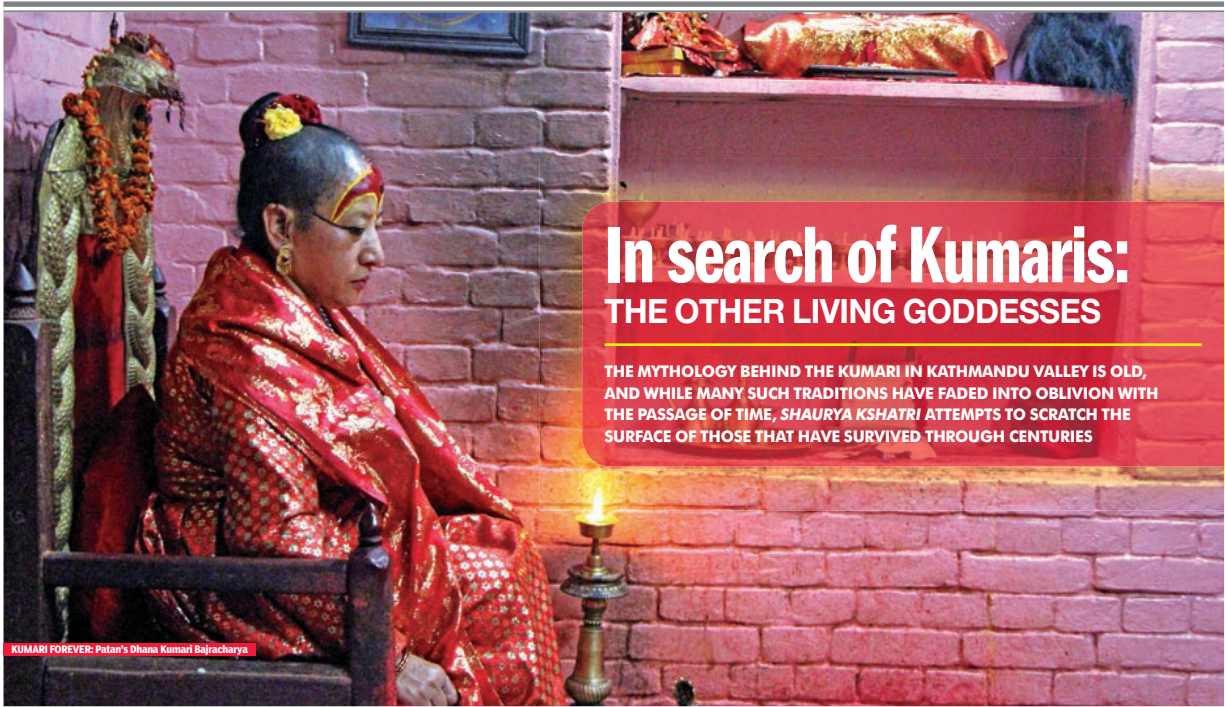


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KUMARI FOREVER: Patan's Dhana Kumari Bajracharya

In search of Kumaris: THE OTHER LIVING GODDESSES

THE MYTHOLOGY BEHIND THE KUMARI IN KATHMANDU VALLEY IS OLD, AND WHILE MANY SUCH TRADITIONS HAVE FADED INTO OBLIVION WITH THE PASSAGE OF TIME, SHAURYA KSHATRI ATTEMPTS TO SCRATCH THE SURFACE OF THOSE THAT HAVE SURVIVED THROUGH CENTURIES

Shaurya Kshatri / THH

During a routine morning assembly at Tri Ratna Cooperative School in Bungamati, one little girl noticeably stands out among the students singing the morning prayer. She is entirely dressed in red, right from the shoes to the ribbon holding her ponytail. Her name is Kripa Bajracharya, the four-year-old Kumari of Bungamati. Unlike the Kumaris of Kathmandu and Patan, the Bungamati Kumari need not adhere to strict rules of confinement. She doesn't have to stay inside her house. She can go to school and mingle with friends, the only rider being that she always be dressed in red — the colour of creative energy.

Much like Kripa, there are about eight Kumaris in the Kathmandu Valley and one in Nuwakot, however, not much is known about the Kumari cults outside of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur in places like Bungamati, Tokha, Makhan, Kilagal, and Panauti.

In medieval times almost every town in the Kathmandu Valley had its own Kumari. In the cities of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Lalitpur, there was one for almost every locality, as well as a special 'royal' Kumari, worshipped by the former Hindu kings. Many traditions have

since disappeared, some only in the past few decades. In Mubahal, Mikhubahal and Kwabahal, it has been discontinued by the locals mostly due to lack of funds. However, amidst all this, a Kumari cult was also revived in Makhan, a courtyard community five minutes' walk north of Basantapur Durbar Square under the initiation of Mangal Krishna Singh, chairman of Makhan Jyapu Guthi, Kathmandu back in 2008 — 20 years after staying dormant.

Revived Kumari cult of Makhan, Tanabahal

Prakriti Maharjan was two years old when she was selected as the Kumari of Makhan. Residing in a small house at Tanabahal, she is also referred to as the Tana Kumari. She is now 14 years old. Much like Kripa, Prakriti need not be home-schooled like the Kumaris of Kathmandu or Patan. Instead, she attends Jana Jyoti Secondary School at Kalimati and is an ardent lover of basketball and badminton. In the future, she wishes to pursue science and hopefully become a doctor. "But there are certain rules, she has to follow as a living goddess," says Singh. "She isn't

supposed to wear leather shoes and eat garlic, onion, tomatoes, chicken and fish."

On other days of the year, Prakriti is like any other girl her age but on couple of occasions, she has to step up to her role as a goddess. She is most busy during Dashain, especially on the ninth day, the *Mahanawami*, where she is brought to Tanabahal for the locals to worship. Likewise, every *Nitya Puja* (daily prayers) during Dashain is carried out in her presence. Another important occasion happens to fall during the month of March, on the day of Ghode Jatra, where Prakriti is seated on a throne and devotees visit her to offer her sweets and receive her blessings. "As a tradition, Makhan Kumari has no role to play during the grand Seto Machhindranath Jatra and Indra Jatra," informs Singh.

As per a stone engraving in Makhan Jyapu Guthi, the tradition of worshipping Kumaris in Makhan dates back to Nepal Samvat 633. Today, it's Nepal Samvat 1140, which suggests the practice, is over 300 years old. "The Kumari Ghar in Basantapur established by King Jaya Prakash Malla was built in 1757, which makes the Kathmandu Kumari only about 263 years old," explains Singh.

Prior to December 2019, the living goddess and her family didn't use to receive any financial support from the government, unlike Kathmandu Kumari. However, since December 13, 2019, the mayor of Kathmandu Metropolitan City, Bidya Sundar Shakya arranged for a monthly salary of Rs 15,000 to be given by the Kathmandu Metropolitan City Office (KMC).

Bungamati Kumari: The oldest among all

According to Ratna Man Tuladhar, cultural expert, writer and a historian of Bungamati, during medieval times, Kumaris in the many kingdoms of the Valley were appointed to strengthen the king's rule. Even to this day, the President visits the goddess during Indra Jatra because blessings from a Kumari was believed to legitimise the rule.

However, the Bungamati Kumari is known as the protector, the defender of the Karunamaya Machhindranath," informs Tuladhar.



Bungamati Kumari Kripa Bajracharya (in red)

Nishant B Gurung / THH

Two sisters: Tokha's Ganesh and Kumari

Siblings of the same family were declared as the living deities of Tokha. Prasna and Acharya was sent to bring Machhindranath who with his *tantric* verses had captured the deity in the now decrepit temple of Rato Machhindranath at Bungamati," says Tuladhar.

Today, the power to protect and prevent Machhindranath from escaping lies in the Kumari, which happens to be little Kripa, who is believed by the locals to be descendant of Acharya himself.

Locals agree that the tradition of worshipping prepubescent girls as goddesses in Bungamati is about 1,600 to 1,700 years old. In Kathmandu, Kumaris are selected from the Shakya clan out of the city's 18 *bahals* (courtyards), in Tokha from the Dangol family, in Makhan from Maharjans, and in Bungamati and Patan from the Bajracharya community.

Kripa is the daughter of Ratna Bajracharya and younger sister of Kinjala Bajracharya, who was the former Kumari of Bungamati, right before Kripa. Their father works as a woodcarver in the locality and has been solely providing for their daughters, who don't get any support whatsoever from either the *guthi* or the government.

Prakash and Tnyu Dongol of Saraswotkheil, Ward-3 of Tokha Municipality, were deemed living deities — Kumari and Ganesh — in April of 2019. Their father says that the pair is 23rd since the time the tradition began in Tokha.

During Indra Jatra, along with the Kumari, both embodiments

The life-long Kumari of Patan

Sixty-seven-year-old Dhana Kumari Bajracharya still follows the cloistered lifestyle of a living goddess she entered when she was mere two years old. She was enthroned in 1954 and was unceremoniously dethroned in the 1980s. The Kumari is traditionally dethroned once she begins to menstruate and since Bajracharya never started her periods, she continued to serve. "However, since it got increasingly difficult to carry her around, since Kumaris of Patan and Kathmandu aren't supposed to walk the streets on foot, she wasn't considered a Kumari and was dethroned," shares her niece Chanira Bajracharya, who herself was chosen as Kumari in 2001.

But since, Dhana Kumari never, to this day, has had her periods, many devotees in Patan still regard her as the living goddess. She lives right across the Kumari Ghar in Ga-bahal of Patan and people still come to her for blessings on special festivities and Rhoto Jatra. In all her life, the life-long goddess hasn't left her confines except during the 2015 earthquake. "That was the first time she stepped out of her home," informs Chanira.

Both Chanira and Dhana Kumari receive pension of about 500 per month, because the government deems Dhana Kumari as a former living goddess.



Makhan Kumari Prakriti Maharjan

Courtesy: Makhan Jyapu Guthi



LIVING DIETIES: Prasna and Prinsha — the Kumari and Ganesh of Tokha

Courtesy: Prakash Dangol