

# The Himalayan

ON SUNDAY

ONCE GODDESSES, THE FORMER KUMARIS NOW WITNESS THEIR MOST CHERISHED FESTIVAL, INDRA JATRA AND ALMOST ABOUT EVERYTHING IN THEIR LIVES AS CAPABLE MORTALS. SHAURYA KSHATRI MEETS THEM TO EXPLORE THE WORLD

through the eyes of a goddess from once upon a time



Ranjan Shakya / TH

Three golden temple chariots were assembled outside the home of the Kumari Ghar, residence of the living goddess. Thousands upon thousands congregated at the Basantapur Durbar Square to witness the chariot procession of their living goddess, Kumari on the occasion of Indra Jatra on September 13. There was both mayhem and merriment, as the resounding uproar of onlookers rumbled all around the square, while the demon Lakhey, with his ferocious face, protruding fangs and mane of red hair, danced his way through the streets of Basantapur accompanied by the endless thud of drums and cymbals. Observing all this unfold, away from the madness on the ground, were the women and children peeking out of the ornately carved windows of the Kumari Ghar. Among them were, Preeti Shakya, 22 and Matina Shakya, 15, two former Kumaris who waited eagerly for the current living goddess, Trishna Shakya, ascend to her palanquin, where once the two of them sat as goddesses.

## Through the eyes of Kumari on a palanquin

Just the day before Indra Jatra, *TH* met Preeti right outside the Kumari Ghar. She was dressed in jeans and had donned on a windcheater, smart phone in one hand and a helmet in another.

Preeti was anointed as a Kumari, a living embodiment of the Hindu goddess Taleju, at an age of three in 2001. For eight years since then, she lived a secluded life inside the Kumari Ghar, except for a few times a year when she left the house for festivals — one of them being the occasion of Indra Jatra. It should, thus, come as no surprise that she keenly waited for the festival — to be taken around the sights, sounds and smells of Hanuman Dhoka, Thamel, Kilagal, Tahity, Jyatha, Ason, Jana Bahal and Indra Chowk.

"Sometimes, it would take a lot of time for the procession to begin. I used to be enthralled at the staggering crowd but mostly I kept wondering as to when the chariot would finally move," explained Preeti.

The present Kumari, Trishna might have felt the same way on September 13. Police undergo quite a quandary to clear the way to pull the ropes as people swarm in droves to catch that one glimpse of the living goddess. It often takes a while to



PREETI SHAKYA

clear a path before the Kumari is finally pulled amid thunderous uproar and gunshots fired by armed men in black and white, the Guruju Ko Paltan and the smell of gunpowder wafts in the air.

Preeti confides that about four years since returning home from the Kumari Ghar, she couldn't even muster the courage to go attend the Indra Jatra. "I must admit I was a little sad to let go of that life — to see someone else take the helm. It wasn't me anymore riding the golden chariot." Now, it's different. She enjoys attending the Jatra. "In fact I see my own childhood unfold before me, only it's lived by another young, innocent little girl."

For six to seven hours, the Kumari has stay to in that chariot, yet in all that time, she never shows a hint of restlessness. "I simply had the patience to sit there. I didn't feel hunger or exhaustion, just excitement and awe," said Preeti.

Backing Preeti's statement is Gautam Shakya, the eleventh generation of Kumari caretakers. He has over the years, looked after six Kumaris. "The rest of us have to go to the restroom, take a rest, eat something, but the Kumari never even so much as hints at any of those yearnings. That is the power of the god — she's no ordinary child," says he.

Similar memories of Indra Jatra are held by Rashmila Shakya who was anointed as a Kumari in 1984. Although, Rashmila and Preeti are from two different generations, both share the same love and affinity with Indra Jatra. "It is the biggest festival for the Kumari," expressed Rashmila in a brief conversation at her residence in Milan Tole, Sitapaila.

There's no doubt that Indra Jatra is one of the most sacred and the biggest street festivals of the country, but it has also been a time for not only commoners but kings and heads-of-states to receive blessings from the goddess incarnate.

As oral history purports, Prithvi Narayan Shah and his troops entered Kathmandu at night during the festival of Indra Jatra while the population of the city was riotously drunk. The then king Jaya Prakash Malla was forced to flee and as the Gorkha conqueror sealed his victory, he went to the Kumari, knelt at her feet and in front of astounded crowds received a *tika* on the forehead from the living goddess herself. Since then the tradition has been a way for kings and now the Presidents to legitimise their tenure.



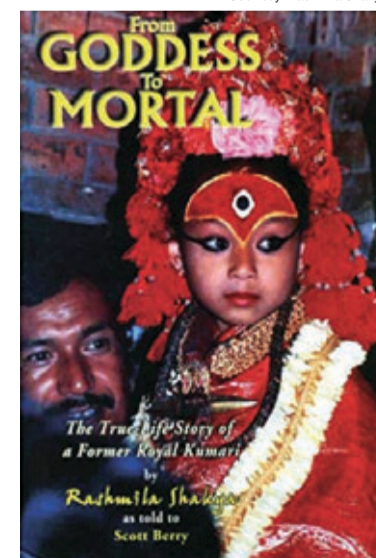
RASHMILA SHAKYA

Courtesy: Rashmila Shakya

Rashmila still vividly remembers her encounters with king Birendra during the Jatra. "He was very soft-spoken," she reminisces. "He would often stay a while after the blessing, staring at me for a while and always kept asking my caretakers about my well-being." Those memories are something, she says, she is never going to forget for the voice still rings. However, Preeti found herself at a time of elephantine political transitions. After the royal massacre, she was yearly visited by former king Gyanendra on Indra Jatra before monarchy was overthrown. She came during monarchy and left at a time when the country was declared a federal, democratic republic. Her last *tika*, as she still vividly remembers, was for the then prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala.

## Life after Kumari

For the vast majority of time, Kumaris spend their days with the family of the caretaker. It had also been the same with Rashmila, except that she also had two 'outsiders' as her friend. The two children would often come to the courtyard of the Kumari Ghar, so much so that they caught the attention of young Rashmila. Since, only Hindus are allowed in the entrance leading up to the floor of the Kumari, the two would often position themselves in the doorway while Rashmila used to sit on the stairs playing ball games. The two children were daughters of author Scott Berry who would later, together with Rashmila, go on to write the book, *From Goddess to Mortal: The True Life Story of Former*



Courtesy: Vajra Publications

### Royal Kumari.

In the midst of all the myths and rumours surrounding the life of a Kumari, the book is among the few sources with the most valid depiction of the age-old tradition. It has helped falsify a lot of mysteries surrounding the living goddesses, from the wide-spread rumours of little girls having to spend a night in a room full of freshly severed goat and buffalo heads to ridiculous beliefs that Kumaris aren't supposed to marry.

Today, Rashmila lives with her husband. They have been married for four years and just recently had a baby boy. He is nine months old.

Like Rashmila, Preeti has moved on. Her time as a goddess is now nothing more to her than a cherished childhood memory. She is

humbled by her experiences yet the jolt back to reality after the end of her reign hadn't been all that easy. For one, getting accustomed to the ways of schools was quite unnerving. Suddenly finding herself in the classroom among hordes of children, she was shocked to see students get scolded. With time, even she wasn't spared a few stricter tones from her teachers. Imagine being revered for a better chunk of childhood only to be lectured for something as frivolous as not doing one's homework!

As with most former Kumaris, it was tough for Preeti — initially, to even get out of the house. She says that up until she was no longer Kumari, she had never even seen an automobile. One can only hope to grasp the extent of awe she must have felt upon seeing one for the very first time. But Preeti is no more terrified of motor vehicles nor the exasperating traffic. In fact she loves to commute on her scooter. Currently studying in a college in Nayabazar, Preeti is a fourth year student of Bachelor of Business Studies (BBS).

However, contrary to Preeti, Rashmila was from a time when formal education wasn't a part of the Kumari household. All that Rashmila had was an hour-long session with a tutor while Preeti sat for exams up until Class IV from the Kumari Ghar itself. Consequently, Rashmila had to start from scratch at the age of 12, when children of her age had already had far more exposure. However, thanks to her resilience, she swiftly jumped classes from Class II to IV to VI and soon became the first Kumari to ever graduate with a Master's degree. Rashmila completed her MSC IT from a college in Maitidevi and is now working as a software developer in Kichapokhari.

With Kumaris, like little Trishna, gaining access to formal education, Rashmila believes that life for present and former Kumaris is improving. Just this year, the pension of the Kathmandu's Kumaris was increased from Rs 120,000 to Rs 180,000 per year. However, Rashmila is of the opinion that a scholarship to finance their higher studies would be of greater help than pension for life. "The way I see it, it's better to teach one how to catch a fish than to simply hand him one," she explains. Rashmila makes a valid point, given that she had to compromise on her engineering dreams for financial limitations. It is perhaps best that they get opportunity towards higher education than be dependent on mere pension funds.

Soon little Trishna will come at the end of her journey as a goddess. Both Preeti and Rashmila are hopeful and confident that one day they will see the little girl in that chariot and the ones who come after her to make their own identity in society as women after they cease to be goddesses.