



Coronating a child goddess in Kathmandu

Matina Shakya was the Kumari being replaced upon having reached puberty.

PHOTO: AFP

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Board any flight to Kathmandu, and the co-passengers would nearly all be happy, vacation-bound Bangladeshi families. Nepal with its visa-free borders, cheap flights, favourable exchange rates, and regional familiarity has made family vacations in exotic locations a reality for the middle-class of this generation. Sunglasses perched, boarding-passes in hand, sneakers laced up in anticipation of exploring a new city, these giddy selfie-taking crowds have explored all the package-tour hot-spots: Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, Pokhara.

A travel piece on Kathmandu Durbar Square therefore would seem dated, even irrelevant, in an over-saturated market of travel blogs. But I happened to be in town at the exact moment when the new Royal Kumari was being crowned, and that is an experience that will not come for another decade or so, until the crowning

of the next Royal Kumari. On that day, the Durbar square opened its doors to temples that remain closed for the rest of the year, offering devotees and the lone curious tourist (aka me) a rare glimpse of what life is like inside the intricately carved, world-famous temples of this small Himalayan country.

The new Kumari had been selected the day before—all major newspapers carried photos of a tiny girl in a flouncy red dress, her eyes lined with curly wing-tips using kohl, being carried to the Kumari Ghar by her father. That is where she would stay from now on, separated from her family. This would also be the last time in a decade that the child would be seen without the ceremonial clothing and makeup of a goddess.

As the girl was moved into the temple-like residence that would be her home from now on, the great wooden

doors of her palace were flung open for devotees to come see the Kumari's inner circle. The time coincided with Dasain, Nepal's most important religious festival, and the line of devotees queuing up for blessings from the Kumari stretched on and on. I was finally ushered inside, after first being relieved of worldly trappings like my shoes. What looks like a square three-storey building from the outside opens to reveal an inner open-air courtyard. The walls of the shrine built in 1757 were intricately carved with local stories of different deities, none of which I could recognise having had no knowledge of Nepal's specific offshoot of Hinduism welded with Mahayana Buddhism in a syncretic mix. For example, the Kumari is not just a goddess for Hindus—in fact, the living goddess of Kathmandu herself is always chosen from the ancient Shakya clan, which is a lineage dating back to

ONE FOR THE ROAD

Shakyamuni Buddha, or as he is recognised more popularly, Gautam Buddha. That Vedic religion as it exists today in clear-cut boxes is a colonial construct is by now a well-accepted fact—and Nepal having never been colonised by the British celebrates a religion of shared deities and shared joys.

We clambered up a set of narrow staircases to climb to the second floor. For all the centuries-old grandeur that the outside of the palace boasts, the interior was surprisingly ordinary. The staircase was narrow and dimly-lit, and the walls were lovingly adorned with photographs of past Kumaris that the building and its caretakers had raised from infancy to adolescence. It almost felt like walking into someone's family home, to be honest.

The top-floor landing led to a long balcony full of... dozens upon dozens of little Kumaris. Each one was dressed in red and gold, with Taleju's (the wrathful form of Durga) characteristic red, gold third-eye painted on her forehead. Some played with toys, some napped in their mothers' laps, some rolled about impatient, two or three stoically stuffed chips into their tiny painted mouths. "Devotees. They have come here to provide companionship to the Kumari. None of these is the actual Kumari," whispered my Nepalese friend who I had taken along to ensure I don't do anything stupid or offend anyone.

The actual Kumari was not very different from the other children. It was her first day on the job, and by the time we went, she had already received and blessed hundreds if not thousands of devotees for a better part of the day, all the while sitting in the same stoic position. One of the many qualities required for being selected as the living goddess is calmness. The child must be able to sit for hours on end, without showing any emotion



The newly coronated Kumari

and without interacting with anyone. This is a tall order for any child of that age. The tiny three-year old Trishna Shakya sat on her throne eyes downcast while devotees prostrated before her; but in her hands she clutched a plastic toy—a minute betrayal of the otherworldly virtues expected of her.

It was at that moment that the devotees (and me) were quickly ushered out of the palace, because two other deities had come to visit the newly coronated goddess. Golden palanquins bearing child-Bhairava (the nihilistic form of Shiva) and child-Ganesha entered the Kumari Ghar. While gods in their own right with their own devoted followings in parts of the region, during the festival of Dasain, the Kumari reigned supreme, and even gods must get blessed by her.

After paying tribute to the Kumari, Ganesha and Bhairava (and me tailing the procession) proceeded to another secretive temple in the Durbar Square—the Taleju temple built during the reign of king Mahendra Malla during the 1500s. Taleju is the goddess that is believed to reside in the body of the Kumari. This temple is also where the selection of Kumaris is done. This goddess, my friend informs me, is an esoteric deity, which means that only the ones who have reached a certain level of enlightenment (or *dikshiya*) can enter the 10-storey tall temple. Apparently only one priest is allowed inside the innermost chamber. This has actually become a point of contention between priests and heritage conservationists and UNESCO. Almost all the temples in Kathmandu Durbar Square had been affected in the 2015 earthquake, with important sites like the Kasthamandap, a temple dating back to 7th century, completely crumbling to the ground. But nobody has been allowed to enter the temple to assess the damage, and so this extremely important temple is at a crossroads regarding its own



Indra jatra celebration

self-preservation—should the temple preserve its chastity or should it preserve its walls?

The gates leading to the temple grounds, impressive gold wooden structures, are opened to the commoners once a year during the ninth day. We poured into the dimly courtyard in the dark, led by the palanquin of child-Ganesha. The god started making the ascent up the temple, carried in the arms of a devotee, while the crowds cheered him on down below in the courtyard.

Meanwhile I set off to explore the rest of the temple grounds. Most of the space was dark to the point of being pitch-black and I

had to feel my way through dark corridors by touching the reliefs carved on the wall. Suddenly, a pungent, metallic, sickly sweet smell flooded my nose. It was the smell of butcher shops in the morning, and the roads of Dhaka in Eid-ul-Azha in the afternoon. I could not see a single thing, but I seemed to be walking towards the smell. The darkness opened into a courtyard that seemed to be the source of the smell.

Legends suggest that the penultimate test for the Kumari is carried out at a courtyard inside this temple. Rumours say that the candidate is made to spend time completely alone in a space with the heads of buffaloes slaughtered during the eighth day of the festival. Anecdotes suggest that between a 108 to 128 animals are sacrificed in this courtyard, although the exact number is not verified. Masked men dance around the grisly stage, attempting to scare the little girl. The candidate who can sit through



The Taleju temple, which is the temple of the deity existing in the Kumari, is opened once a year for devotees.

PHOTO: COURTESY



Lakhey performance during Indra Jatra.



Pho, Peace and Quiet in Ninh Binh, Vietnam

Kazi Tahsin Agaz Apurbo

I was staying in the town of Ninh Binh, about two and a half hours from Hanoi. The locals run homestays there and I stayed in an estate by the river, it was quite secluded and away from the bustle of the town, if that's what you're looking for. These places provided free breakfast and I usually went for the local favourite—pho. A noodle soup with either chicken or beef or vegetarian, it is topped with fresh herbs and greens. Very flavourful and healthy, it is filling as well—a bowl of pho at in the morning is a great start to the day!

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Bubble Hotel in Lam's Beach, Bali, Indonesia

Zyma Islam

"A short hike down a cliff-face leads to a long strip of beach that is yours. Accommodation involves inflated transparent bubble tents, so you can go to sleep under the stars. In front of you is the vast expanse of the Indian ocean inviting you to lose yourself. Behind is a cliff-face shielding you from the rest of the world. A crackling bonfire on the beach keeps the draught out. A full-moon lights up the entire place. Creep into your bubble to watch the rain falling around you. And wake up to be greeted by a pack of baby monkeys stealing your breakfast!"

Scan the QR code to see this location on Google Maps:

