

## **Cultural Documentation in British Travel Literature: An Analysis of Isabella Tree's *The Living Goddess***

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### **ABSTRACT**

As a South Asian country without colonial history; but hit by globalization, travels to Nepal is yet to be explored. Nepal had an upsurge of travellers after 1951, the year when Nepal was unified as a nation. The study of travel narratives on Nepal found that there is hardly any manuscript on Nepal written by the West before this particular year as Nepal was circumscribed by Rana dynasty, the regime which kept Nepal unchanged for centuries. Years after, in 2014, Isabella Tree, a journalist from Britain visited Nepal with an enthusiasm of looking at the culture of a spiritually identified country. But she got fascinated by the ritually significant, culturally prevalent and socially ambivalent practice called Living Goddess in Nepal. This paper is a study on her travel narrative *The Living Goddess* and how she tries to rewrite the history by probing on the practice and misconceptions. The authors of this paper aim at revisiting Kumari cult as a symbol of empowerment of women.

**Index words-** British, Travel, Nepal, Cultural documentation

### **INTRODUCTION**

Virgin Goddess or Kumari worship dates back to 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, when Nepal was not unified as a country. The tradition probably began during the rule of Malla dynasty, especially in relation to goddess Talejubhavani, the protector of the Kathmandu valley. Thus Kumari is undoubtedly the benign form of Devi and is generally associated with the worship of daughters

in Hindu Society of some South Asian countries. The practice has also got prominence in India as there are two temples dedicated to Kumaris in Kanyakumari and Kangra valley of Punjab. In both of these temples, Kumari is regarded as the embodiment of virgin goddess. Similar practices like worshipping the Kumari form can also be seen in Mother Goddess practice in different parts of India. The mother goddess is an elevated form of Kumari who are deprived of getting married and losing their virginity. They must live and die as the mother of a particular society and pray for the good existence of human kind. Mannarassala Amma, who is treated to be a mother goddess in Kerala, is an example of this practice. She is the supreme force and protector of Nagas(snakes) and she is also protected by Nagas even in her sleep, as the mythology says.

## METHODOLOGY

Virginity, according to mythology is the symbolic of primal feminine force, an identity that manifests the fullness of the female. Arun Gupto in his book *Goddesses of Kathmandu Valley* writes that “[T]he fullness of Kumari can be understood as the feminine identity that is beyond the social space of the male determinism in the sense that she is exclusively and beyond male possession” (Gupto,2014). She is an entity who is independent, free of ideas, composed and spiritual in her own ways. She is not united with any of the male powers that becomes the source spirit from which she gets Enlightened. Her enlightenment is the result of her inner mind’s purity and for the Nepalis, the omen of her lakshans.

Isabella Tree unveils the secrets of spirituality in the practice of Kumari worship in her work *The Living Goddess* and understands the depth to which it is associated to the land of Nepal. Initially started as a travel narrative, the book dwells into the realms of cultural study and ritualistic apprehensions on the practice of Kumari, finally leaving the book as the multidisciplinary approach to study Nepal. As the living cult of Kumari exists as a matter of ethical dispute, Isabella foresees the tradition as a mediation between myth and reality, power and ego and tradition and modernity. The dark side of practice is revealed as Isabella points out the general superstitions related with the Kumari cult. Tree (2014) writes:

“To Nepalis she is known as Kumari—the word for a virgin or unmarried girl. All seeing, all-knowing, she is said to have eyes in the past and the future, and to see everything that goes on in the present. She has the power to cure illnesses, to remove obstacles in the way of happiness, to bestow immeasurable blessings on those pure of heart. She is said to punish the wicked with a single withering stare” (Tree 2014)

The narrative begins with the uneasiness in moving into the deeper corners of Kumari Chen- the place where Kumari lives. She writes:

“The Kumari Ghar or Kumari Chen- the Kumari House- was a hive of activity, the entrance around the corner in Durbar Square guarded by a pair of magnificent stone lions. Every day devotees would climb the short flight of steps between the lions and, ducking their heads beneath the ornate wooden doorway, carry plates of offerings inside. Across the little courtyard they entered a door tucked away in a corner marked ‘Hindus ONLY’” (Tree 2014).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A girl who has not yet reached menarche (puberty) is selected from the Shakya community of the Newar caste to be the Kumari. She returns to her normal status upon puberty, as the goddess who is believed to live in her body vacates it at that time. The selection is very rigorous. Only a girl in excellent health, having the thirty-two physical perfections attributed to a goddess, with signs of fearlessness and serenity is chosen for the position. During a Hindu festival on the Kalratri (black night) she goes through a ritual where she must not show any fear, when the covered heads of 101 buffaloes sacrificed to the goddess, Kali, are revealed to her.

Once selected, she is exposed to a period of training and ritual cleansing and installed in her palace, or Kumari Ghar, with her attendants. Her life as a Kumari has little semblance to a normal childhood. She is considered to be invested with power to bring good fortune to those who visit her and see her. The King kisses her feet, leading dignitaries and officials receive her blessing, crowds gather in the courtyard to receive a glance from her and she is carried around the city in a palanquin once a year.

There is no information available on the impact of this experience on the girls who have held the position but it is clear that they lead very restrictive lives. They lose their childhood and are denied the rights delineated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In the past, they were denied any education but in recent years their education is undertaken by private tutors, although it is reported that Kumaris in small cities are now permitted to attend schools and participate in everyday school life. The end of her “divinity” is necessarily unplanned and therefore abrupt, and return to normal life after she has been divested of her status would require major adjustments. She receives a State pension each month so that her material needs are met.

The popular belief was that a man who marries a Kumari is destined to die early and there was speculation that girls who have been Kumaris are deprived of marriage and motherhood. Recent evidence has challenged this perception, as the information from the post Kumari life of these girls has shown that, excepting the last few, some still young Kumaris since the 1920s have been married and have had two to six children.

Isabella was not ready to sacrifice the drafting of facts in a way to reveal the mystery behind the practice of Living Goddess. One reason is quite sure that she was denied the access to learn more about Living Goddess once and later after the Royal Massacre, the people associated with the tradition of Kumari was willing to reveal what they know about the cult in fear of spoiling the practice by the intervention of Maoism in Nepal. The second reason revolves around her huge fascination towards the country as she says in one of her interviews:

“I love Nepal, but it’s really the Kathmandu Valley where I’ve spent the most time. It’s changed a lot since I first went there in the 1980s. We used to bicycle everywhere – I wouldn’t dare to do that now; the roads are so terrifying. And there are concrete buildings flying up all over the place where once there were rice fields and groves of bamboo and quiet tracks with shade for buffalo carts. The pollution can be ghastly and the traffic frustrating, and the lovely Bagmati and Vishnumati rivers are now treacherous drains oozing chemicals and stinking to high heaven. From an environmental point of view, it’s heart breaking. And yet, beneath this shadow, the most extraordinary things are still going-on. Young Buddhist monks and priests who can make the most incredible mandalas from memory with multi-coloured sand; legends and myths and story-telling; women healers – ‘dyamas’ – communicating with the deities through spirit possession; festivals and rituals and jatras every day of the year; religious painters making the most exquisite ‘paubhas’; bronzecasters forging Buddhas and bodhisattvas in their own back yards; musicians and dancers moved by the spirit of gods and goddesses; people given to devotion and empathy and kindness, and endless generosity to strangers; and Living Goddesses, of course. I always try and tell people who are going to Nepal not to be put off by their first impressions of Kathmandu, but to be patient and dig deeper and what they find will enchant them more than they could ever have imagined” (Gauri, 2014)

Isabella Tree talks about the religious tolerance behind the venerated child goddess as an overwhelmed travel writer. It is a blend of Hinduism and Buddhism. Being a traveller by profession, Isabella opines that it is wonder and unique to see a culture which is old and valued by the nation accepts both Hinduism and Buddhism as the principle of one practice. The

Newars are a Tibeto-Burman speaking people who up to the Gorkha conquest of 1768 constituted the great majority of the population of Kathmandu valley. Today they account for approximately 50 per cent of a total population of just over half a million. They are the proud inheritors of an ancient urban civilization, and even now both Patan and Bhadgaon are almost 100 per cent Newar cities. Both Buddhism and Hinduism have ancient roots in Kathmandu valley. Hinduism, as in India, has a history that eventually merges into prehistory, while Buddhism most probably appeared not long after its origin in south Nepal in the fifth century BC.

The caste which Kumaris belong to is the Shakyas, the householder monks who are conservative, devout, well-educated and relatively prosperous. As members of the Newar religious caste, at the top of the tree, second only to the priestly Vajracharya, Shakyas are highly respected in Nepali society. Thus Living Goddess never faces the turmoil of being in an underprivileged society. And moreover, all the ex-living goddesses treated their plight of Living Goddess as a blessing than a curse. Chanira Bajracharya, the ex-Kumari of Patan opines that the tradition encourages respect for women in a male-dominated society.

The position of Newari women is discussed in *The Living Goddess* by pointing out the 'Ihi' Ceremony which is also known as 'bel biha'. It is mostly regarded as the sacred of all Newar domestic rituals and is undertaken by all young Newar girls before reaching puberty, usually between the ages of four and ten. She says:

Marked by the ritual exchange of a wood-apple, or bel fruit, ihi symbolises marriage to a god. The ceremony is a joyful occasion. The prepubescent Newar girls are dressed in red like brides with large red tika marks painted on their foreheads, and gold jewellery. Their feet and hands are painted red and their hair parted with vermilion powder or tied with a red bow. As a mock betrothal ihi also grants a young Newar girl the status of a married woman, protecting her position in the future.

The widowhood of a women is also safeguarded by Ihi as she never confronts the stigma of being a widow because of the presence of her first husband, the God. Ihi also reinforces the idea that a woman does not belong to a man. She can remarry or even lead her life as a spinster.

## **SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

With regard to the practice of Kumari worship, the writers and journalists took an easy route and reproduced the same age old fallacies because of the fact that the truth is much harder to

explain. It is significant to note the ethics in writing about Nepal by the travellers including tourists, journalists and anthropologists from different parts of the world. Isabella Tree, without hesitation, tried to show whatever data she has collected on the practice of Kumari cult and presented it before the persons who helped her in the vogue of understanding the culture and practices. It is noteworthy that a writer can uphold and practice integrity in this way to show case the way of data collection rather than hiding the written draft from the persons who are responsible for. In many ways, the practice of integrity in writing can avoid the pitfalls of orientalism in literature.

### **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

As it is mentioned in the Introduction, Living Goddess shares an equal treatment in the ritualistic practices connected to Mother Goddess and Nagakanyaka worship in many parts of India. This proves the scope of the study of the connection between the evolution of rituals and practices in India and Nepal. This paper's objective is to derive the argument of empowerment of women in the ritualistic practices of Nepal. But, further study on the position of women in Nepal is also recommended.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is a popular belief that when Kumaris are out of Kumari Chen- where they lived and venerated for a long time, the life they lead is a miserable one. Some believe that they are trafficked as prostitutes to Mumbai or Bangkok. On contrary, Isabella Tree explains the afterlife of Kumaris as Living Goddess from the ideas organised from ex-Kumaris and people associated with Kumari. Tree discloses the fact that they are still honoured in the community and prayed with gifts. Isabella Tree opines that this is a reminder of the sacredness of all women. Because of the intervention of Maoism and the introduction of the parliamentary form of government, the practice of Kumari cult is highly criticised and faces the threat of ban when it is considered by some group of people as the trivialisation of girl child. Being a British Journalist writes on Nepal, Isabella Tree identifies her duty to make the world aware of the underlying problems in this practice which makes it a difficult and strenuous process for an outsider to know Kumaris in deep.

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### **DECLARATION**

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2. I confirm that all authors of the manuscript have no conflict of interests to declare.
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