

7 Kumārī or ‘Virgin’ Worship in Kathmandu Valley¹

KUMĀRĪ is a goddess who has been a recognized member of the Hindu pantheon for at least 2,500 years. Throughout the long history of her worship she has displayed qualities of a highly ambiguous² kind: on the one hand, she is literally by name ‘virgin’ or ‘chaste young girl’; on the other, she is classed as one of a group of mother goddesses who are also the sexual partners of leading male deities. For example, in the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka*, a third or fourth century BC text, Rudra’s spouse Ambikā is addressed as Kanyākumārī (Muir 1967, IV: 426-7 and Chattopadhyaya 1970:153-5). Ambikā literally means ‘little mother’ while *kanyā* and *kumārī* are both words that are used to refer to young unmarried girls. *Kanyā* most commonly occurs in the phrase *kanyā dāna* (giving a girl in marriage), and hence necessarily refers to pre-menstrual, and for high-caste Hindus, young girls. *Kumārī* is translated by Monier-

Reprinted (with minor alterations) with permission from *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 1976, 10 (2):293-316.

¹ The research on which this paper is based was mostly carried out in Kathmandu valley in 1973-74. I am grateful to Sydney University, the Australian Research Grants Committee, the Myer Foundation, and the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia for having financed the fieldwork. I am also much indebted to the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University for having assisted my research in many ways.

² O’Flaherty (1973) has provided a scholarly analysis of the pervasive interplay that occurs between asceticism and eroticism in the mythology of Śiva. Leach (1962) has demonstrated a similar ambiguity in the qualities attributed to Gaṇeśa, the elephant-headed son of Śiva, who is also Kumārī’s half-brother.

Williams (1899:292) as 'a young girl, one from ten to twelve years old, maiden, daughter; or [in the Tantras] any virgin up to the age of sixteen or before menstruation has commenced'.³ In the *Mahābhārata* and other early texts Kumārī is listed as one of the many epithets of Durgā, the beautiful and mature destroyer of male demons (Sorenson 1904:434). But by far her most common appearance is as Kumārī, one of a set of seven or eight 'mothers' (*matrkā*) who are the personified energies or consorts (*śakti*) of prominent male gods.

Despite her antiquity and her literary prominence Kumārī has, at least within India, remained a relatively minor member of the pantheon. The only temples that I know of specifically dedicated to her are those of Kanyākumārī at Cape Comorin in the south,⁴ and Kanyā Devī in the Kangra valley in the north-east Punjab.⁵ Her

³ Sir Monier-Williams also noted that *kumārī* is the female form of *kumāra* 'a child, boy, youth, son, [*R̥g Veda; Atharva Veda*]; a prince, heir-apparent associated in the kingdom with the reigning monarch [especially in theatrical language]'. Just as Kumārī is an epithet of Śakti or Durgā so is Kumāra identified with Skanda or Kārtikeya. Skanda, 'the spurt of semen', is called Kumāra because he remains forever young and single—he is the eternal and beautiful bachelor to whom young Newar girls are married in the *ihī* ceremony. Like Kumārī, he is dressed in red and rides on a peacock. The ambiguous nature of both deities is apparent in the common appearance of Skanda (or Kumāra) as the male consort of Kumārī in the various lists of the Sapta or Aṣṭa Matrākā. Together, they combat demons with the power of youth.

⁴ A Greek sea captain noted in about AD 60 that 'Beyond this there is another place called Comari, at which are the Cape of Comari and a harbour; hither come those men who wish to consecrate themselves for the rest of their lives, and bathe and dwell in celibacy; and women also do the same; for it is told that a goddess once dwelt here and bathed' (Schoff 1912:46). About 70 years later the geographer Ptolemy referred to the Cape as 'Comoria Akron'. Yule (1903:382-3), writing in 1871, noted that 'the monthly bathing in her honour...is still continued, though now the pilgrims are few'. He also noted that at the beginning of the Portuguese era in India, there was a small kingdom in this area called Comari. Morris (1968:191) noted that 'there, a little outside the town (Cape Comorin), is a temple of great antiquity dedicated to Kumārī, the virginal aspect of Durgā'. He also recorded that it has a Brahman *pūjārī*, but is no longer an important place of pilgrimage.

⁵ Rose (1919, i:320) noted that at Lagpata in the Kangra valley there is 'a temple to Kaniya Devi the virgin goddess, whose fair is held on 9th Har. Her Brahmin *pūjari* is a Bhojki and *bhog* is only offered and a lamp lit in the evening'.

worship, however, was and still is, of greater importance than the paucity of her shrines might suggest. In many parts of India, but most especially in Bengal and in the Punjab, *kumārī pūjā* acquired much popularity amongst the followers of the Tantra. In this ritual the aim is not so much to worship a goddess called Kumārī as to utilize the power of young living virgins in order to invoke the spirit of the far from virginal *śakti*, Durgā or Kālī. Little has been recorded of this most interesting ritual,⁶ though it seems likely that the normal procedure was to regard the girls as living goddesses solely for the duration of the *pūjā*.

Rose made a number of references to the worship of young unmarried girls as Devī in the Kangra valley:

Devī is personified in a girl under ten years of age twice a year and offerings are made to her as if to the goddess on these occasions. ... The worship of Devī is always cropping up. Some years ago some enterprising people of the Kapurthala state got two or three young unmarried girls and gave out that they had the power of Devī. The ignorant accepted this belief and worshipped them as goddesses. They visited various parts of the Jullundur District and were looked up to with great reverence everywhere, but as good results did not follow, the worship died out'. (Rose 1911-1919 Vol.1:329)

In Kathmandu Valley the Newars have developed a unique cult in which two- to three-year-old girls are formally installed in office as

⁶ Bharati provided a brief description: 'Kumari-Puja: a lovely and impressive ceremony current all over Bengal and in other parts of India, though with lesser frequency; a girl of twelve, of a Brahmin family, is installed on the *pitha* like an image of Sakti, and is worshipped accordingly after the *pratistha* or installation ceremony; in this particular *pūjā*, the virgin represents the goddess Sarasvati. However, most Brahmans regard the presentation of their daughter for this ceremony as inauspicious (*akusala*)' (Bharati 1965:160, fn 95).

Macdonald made the following more detailed statement: 'The Kumari puja is well known in Calcutta. A house holder, intent on thus worshipping the Sakti, gets [from outside the membership of his own house] a girl, sets her up as a goddess on a small board or platform surrounded with nine or twelve other females [men not excluded], places a plate under one of her feet, and to that foot makes the usual offerings of flowers, water, etc. A Brahmin gentleman who has himself been present at one or more of these Kumari Pujas, tells me that in Calcutta they are not uncommon.' (MacDonald 1903:41-2). For additional references to *kumārī pūjā* see Abbott (1932:63) and Chakravarti (1963:81).

Kumārīs and then regularly worshipped as such until certain disqualifying signs appear—usually some six or seven years later. My aim in this paper is to demonstrate how even in this cult of quite explicitly virginal girls the basic ambiguity is still apparent. Though out of office as soon as they menstruate, they are nevertheless worshipped as living forms of such mature goddesses as Taleju Bhavānī, Durgā, Kālī and even the Buddhist Vajradevī; though in theory disqualified as soon as they lose a milk tooth they are also said to possess a full set of adult teeth; though pure deities who should not have animal sacrifices made to them, they are also fearsome goddesses who thrive on the hot blood of dying buffalo and goat. I will argue that the ambiguous nature of the goddess, both in Nepal and India is paralleled by a similar ambiguity in the Hindu conception of the female role. In a society in which status is explicitly defined in terms of relative purity, high value has inevitably been accorded to the young girl as yet unsullied by blood, sex or childbirth. In orthodox Brahmanical terms the virgin, especially if she is also pre-menstrual, is in a state of exceptional purity. It is for this reason that a living virgin is thought to constitute not only the perfect bride, but also an appropriate vessel or container for the spirit of a goddess. But other than in these two contexts virginity is not highly esteemed amongst Hindus. On the contrary, virgins are believed to be unable to obtain either spiritual enlightenment in this world or to reach the abode of the gods in the next (Walker 1968, ii:571). It is only as her husband's sexual partner and mother of his sons that a woman is capable of fulfilling her *dharma*.

Mary Douglas has convincingly argued that 'when the social system requires people to hold dangerously ambiguous roles, these persons are credited with uncontrolled, unconscious, dangerous, disapproved powers—such as witchcraft and evil eye' (1966:99). That such powers have for long been attributed to Indian virgins is evident in the following statement of Walker:

There seems to be an almost universal belief in ancient and medieval India in the perils attending the condition of virginity, and particularly in the dangers of initiatory intercourse with a girl. Hymenal blood was considered extremely potent and its touch brought contamination. The shedding of blood, reprehensible at all

times, became more so in the case of virgin blood. A man is particularly prone to its injury because the excitement of the sexual act finds him defenceless against the psychic dangers inherent in all contact with virgins. It was believed that a woman untouched by the male rod was liable on defloration to flash forth a devastating aura that would bring ruin to a man, blight to his cattle, and desolation to his home. (Walker 1968 ii:571-2)

The followers of the Tantra seek to gain control of powers such as these in the performance of *kumārī pūjā*; in the case of the right-handed practitioners by the use of conventional ritual procedures, and of the left-handed by either symbolic or real sexual intercourse. In other words, the virgin, who in other contexts is a threat to men and to their activities, is here used to positive effect in furthering their spiritual aspirations. The benefits that flow from the Tantric performance of *kumārī pūjā* are vividly described in the Yoginī Tantra:

Those gods ever desire a Brahman, a virgin, Sakti, fire, Sruti and a cow for worship on their sacrificial grounds. If one virgin be worshipped, it will be a second puja. The fruit of virgin worship cannot be told by me. All this [universe] movable and immovable belongs to Kumari [virgin] and Sakti. If one young damsel be worshipped, seen only in spirit, then actually all the high goddesses will be worshipped without doubt ... in time; by Kumari-worship, the worshipper attains Sivahood. Where Kumari is worshipped, that country purifies the earth; the places all round for five crores will be most holy. There one should do Kumari Puja; there breaks forth great light manifest in the land of Bharata [India]. (Macdonald 1902:41-2)

Yet, despite such awesome powers all males of high caste both were and still are required to face them when they confront their young virgin brides after marriage. For most, the wedding rites provide a sole and sufficient protection. But in some cases special precautions are taken to ensure that the husband does not himself face the dangers. In many parts of India the mother or some other close female relative ensures that the hymen is broken prior to marriage. Chakrabarty (1945:111, 325), for example, recorded that 'the hymen of Hindu girls is generally torn in their early girlhood by the forefinger of their mother in daily washing the vulva with water'. Walker (1968, ii:572) has noted the use of such ritually

powerful males as Kings and priests for the defloration of virgins. But perhaps of greatest interest is the widespread occurrence of the mock-marriage of virgin girls to gods, Brahmans, trees, swords, snakes and other erotic and phallic objects. By far the most famous of these is the *tali*-tying ceremony of the Nayars of Kerala. Gough (1955: 71-4) has argued that amongst these people, and indeed most probably throughout India, the power of the virgin derives from her association with a powerful and castrating mother figure. The mock-marriage is, she argued, performed to take the awesome mother out of the virgin so that ordinary men can safely copulate with her. In support of her argument she noted that during the rites the girls are brought into close association with Bhagavatī, the fearsome mother goddess who is also a pure virgin. As mother, Bhagavatī is Devī and hence equated with Durgā, Kālī and Bhadrakālī, the fierce consorts of Śiva who destroy male demons. As virgin goddess she is worshipped as Kanyākumārī, the famous deity at Cape Comorin. Furthermore, the dead Nayar virgin can herself become a form of Bhagavatī to whom a shrine must be erected.

Gough provided an orthodox Freudian explanation for the equation of virgin with mother by arguing that it is a product of unconscious incestuous desires. She wrote:

The virgin, then, in these castes is sacred: it is ritually dangerous to take her virginity. My hypothesis is that this is so because the virgin is unconsciously associated with the mother, as a woman whom it is desirable to approach sexually but who may not be approached, because of the threat of castration or murder by a male parental figure. (Gough 1955:71)

Gough's remarkable hypothesis has met with little favour. Yalman (1963:38), for example, rejected it on the grounds that 'the Oedipus Complex, as described by psycho-analysts, appears as a universal phenomenon and, therefore, loses its force in the 'explanation' of local and particular ceremonies'. Surely the answer to this common anthropological criticism is that though the Oedipus Complex may well be universal it does not necessarily follow that it is of equal importance in all cultures? If it should contribute to the meaning of 'local ceremonies' then it may be that in such cultures the complex is of unusual strength. I do not, however, wish to

defend Gough's claim that the complex is indeed well-developed amongst the Nayars—her evidence, though suggestive, is far from conclusive. My aim is, rather, to confirm her empirical finding that amongst the Nayars, and most probably throughout the Hindu world, the virgin goddess is infused with the spirit of a sword-wielding, blood-lusting and sexually desirable female destroyer of male demons. Regardless of whether or not this fusion of female roles may be understood in Freudian terms, it seems highly likely that the *tali*-tying and similar mock-marriages are performed in order to neutralize the dangerous power within the virgin. I find it a remarkable vindication of Gough's functional argument that the Newars of Kathmandu, a people who have clearly demonstrated their concern with virginity by developing a major cult of living virgin goddesses, also attach great ritual significance to the mock-marriage of virgins and to the strict seclusion of girls at or just prior to their first menstruation. I will conclude the paper with a brief analysis of both ceremonies.

The Newars

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 relative popularity of the two religions has varied from time to time, largely in accordance with changes in royal patronage (Allen 1973:1-14 and Chapter 6, this volume). Orthodox monastic Buddhism was the dominant form for a long period extending almost from the time of the Buddha up to about the tenth or eleventh century, when it began to give way to the growing popularity of Tantricism. In Hinduism this meant the growth of cults such as Śāktism and Śāivism, while in Buddhism Vajrayāna practices led to the collapse of celibate

monasticism. Some commentators have interpreted this period as constituting the triumph of Hinduism over Buddhism—but a more accurate view must surely be that in both religions there was a switch from the pure, ascetic renunciatory pole to the greater ritualism and sensuality found both in Tantrayāna and Vajrayāna. It is true, however, that from about the early fourteenth century up to the present day, a succession of high-caste Hindu kings contributed to a steady decline in the strength and popularity of Buddhism. Today, the relative popularity of the two religions varies not only from city to city, but also from caste to caste and even individual to individual. Furthermore, as a number of previous observers have noted, the relationship between the two religions is one of synthesis rather than division and opposition. This is most especially apparent in the Kumārī cult for here we find a classic Hindu goddess who is not only worshipped by Buddhist priests, but incarnates herself in young girls of pure Buddhist caste.

Though Newars like to refer to a remote period in which their society was without caste, it is today, and has been for many hundreds of years, internally divided into a large number of named hereditary groups, each of which is endogamous, associated with one or more traditional occupations, and hierarchically ranked on the basis of relative purity (see Table 4, Chapter 6:166).

This fundamental structural feature is, as Yalman has persuasively argued, for Ceylon and Malabar, crucial for an understanding of the relationship that obtains between the purity of castes and the purity of women. 'The preoccupation with caste purity narrows and focuses attention on a profound "danger" situation—the appearance of female sexuality' (Yalman 1963:39). Mock-marriages, child-marriages and the ritual seclusion of girls during first menstruation must all be seen as institutionalized responses to the dangers associated with the end of virginal and pre-menstrual purity. I will argue that the Newar cult of living virgins is part of the same syndrome.

Kumārī and Taleju

There are at present (1976) ten Newar girls regularly worshipped as living Kumārīs; three (four until recently) in Kathmandu, three in

Bhadgaon, two in Patan and one each in Deopatan and Bungamati.⁷ There are major differences according to such variables as the girl's caste membership, who worships her and what attributes of what goddess are most stressed. Though there is a particularly close historical connection between Śākya caste, Taleju as presiding deity and royal patronage, it is not invariant for the ex-royal Kumārī of Patan is selected from a Vajrācārya community. The other four Vajrācārya Kumārīs have a more Tantric and Buddhist character than their Śākya counterparts, and are more closely associated with the Vajrayāna deity Vajradevī than with the Hindu Taleju or Durgā. The two Jyāpu Kumārīs are worshipped by the Pradhāns and Dyaḥ Brahmins, two high-ranking Newar Hindu castes. The full list of eleven is as follows:

Kathmandu

1. The Raj (royal) or Lākū (palace) Kumārī. Śākya caste and worshipped by King and nation.
2. Mu (chief) Kumārī. Gubhāju (Vajrācārya) caste of Mu Bāhāḥ worshipped mostly by members of her own caste in central (Datu) Kathmandu. This position has been vacant for some years.
3. Kwā Bāhāḥ Kumārī. Gubhāju caste of Kwā Bāhāḥ worshipped both by members of her own caste in north (Thane) Kathmandu and by the Pradhāns of Bhagawan Bāhāḥ in Thamel locality.
4. Kilagar Kumārī. Jyāpu caste and worshipped primarily by the Pradhāns of Kilagar-Itum Bāhāḥ area.

Patan (Lalitpur)

5. The ex-royal Kumārī of Ha Bāhāḥ in Ga Bāhāḥ locality. Gubhāju caste and worshipped by most Patan residents and also by a number of individuals, not exclusively Newar, from elsewhere.
6. Sonimha Kumārī. Jyāpu caste of Mikha Bāhāḥ. Worshipped by Dyaḥ Brahmins of that locality.

Bhadgaon (Bhaktapur)

7. Ekānta Kumārī. She can be chosen from any of the *bāhāḥ* of Bhadgaon and may be of either Gubhāju or Śākya castes. Her

⁷ See Allen (1996) for further details concerning each local Kumārī.

official residence is in Dīpankar Bāhāḥ and in the past she was worshipped by the Malla Kings of Bhadgaon. Today she is publicly worshipped by most of the population of Bhadgaon during Dasai(n), and is available for private clients on request.

8. Wala Lāekū Kumārī. Selection as with Ekānta Kumārī but she is especially associated with Wala Lāekū, a *bāhāḥ*-like courtyard near Dattatreya temple where she has her *āga(n)*. Worshipped only during Dasai(n).

9. Tebukche(n) Kumārī. As with the other Bhadgaon Kumārīs she can be selected from any of the Gubhāju or Śākya families. She is worshipped only during Dasai(n) and especially by the Jyāpus of Tebuk locality. She is unique in that she must be an unweaned baby and hence replaced annually.

Deopatan

10. Cābahī Kumārī. She is chosen from the Śākya members of Cābahi (Suvarnapurnamahāvihāra), and is said to have once been worshipped by the Kings of Deopatan. Today her worship is mostly confined to the members of her *bahī*.

Bungamati

11. She is chosen from a single patrilineal extended family (*kawaḥ*) of Gubhāju caste whose members are known as Panju, and who share in the important ritual duties associated with their famous god Matsyendranāth. She is worshipped by the members of all 'water accepting' Bungamati castes.

The Royal Kumārīs and Taleju

The three most important Kumārīs are those who prior to the Gorkha conquest were worshipped by the Malla Kings of the three capital cities of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhadgaon (i.e. numbers 1, 5 and 7). Through royal patronage they ranked amongst the foremost of popular divinities, and even today they can boast of many possessions, especially jewellery, donated by past monarchs. When the Gorkhas conquered the valley they made Kathmandu their capital, and Patan and Bhadgaon fell into relative obscurity. Though the Patan and Bhadgaon ex-royal Kumārīs are still of local importance, they are virtually unknown outside their home cities. By contrast, the Kathmandu royal Kumārī has achieved an even greater

eminence, for she has continued to receive the patronage of the new Shaha dynasty. She is now a divinity of national importance, and her annual chariot festival is a spectacular and colourful occasion attended by huge crowds. The remaining eight non-royal Kumārīs, though they each present features of considerable interest, are all of local importance and for reasons of space will have to be ignored in this paper. I will, in fact, confine most of my comments to the principal royal Kumārī of Kathmandu.

The history of Kumārī worship in Nepal is as yet shrouded in a great deal of legend and mystery. Though there is evidence that a goddess of this name has been worshipped for a very long time, certainly since at least as early as the sixth century AD (Hasrat 1970:41-42 and Wright 1972:125), no firm statement can be made as to the origin of the custom of worshipping living Kumārīs. From various indirect sources it seems possible that it may have begun in the form of small local cults, possibly similar to those still found in the north-east Punjab (Rose 1919 i:320, 327, 329), shortly after the introduction of Vajrayāna Buddhism during the eleventh century AD. Indeed, one of the local chronicles (*vamśāvali*), records that even at this early date a Patan Kumārī was worshipped by a King (Wright 1972:157). Most of the chronicles and oral traditions, however, place the origin of the royal cults in the Malla period, some naming Trailokya Malla, a late sixteenth-century ruler of an undivided kingdom with his capital at Bhadgaon, others Siddhinarasingh, a seventeenth century king of Patan, and yet others Jayaprakasa Malla, the mid-eighteenth century Kathmandu monarch who lost his kingdom to the Gorkhas (See Hasrat 1970:59-60; Anderson 1971:132; Moaven 1975:169-71).

An important feature of most of these tales is the appearance of Taleju or Tulaja Bhavānī as the tutelary divinity of the relevant reigning monarch, a position which she has retained to the present day. Taleju is consistently represented as a beautiful goddess who once maintained an intimate relationship with her worshipping king. Then one day an event occurred which so offended her that she no longer appeared in physical form. In some versions the King himself committed the offence by breaking the rule that he must not see her when he came to visit her; in others the offender was a suspicious female member of his family, either his wife or his daughter. But

whatever the version, there is always the implication, which is sometimes made explicit, that the King developed a strong desire to sexually possess the goddess. The following night Taleju appeared to the King in a dream and told him that though she could no longer meet him as before she would give him the opportunity to worship and consult with her by taking the form of a young girl whose family practised a debased or polluting occupation. In most versions the caste named was the Śākya, though in Patan it was the Gubhāju. The selection is of interest on two counts—though the Mallas were orthodox Hindu Kings and both Taleju and Kumārī are unquestionably Hindu deities, the Śākya and Gubhāju are pure Buddhist castes of high repute. They are the sole occupants of the former Buddhist monasteries (*bāhāḥ* and *bahī*), and even today, some six or seven hundred years after the collapse of monasticism, their boys are initiated in group ceremonies in which they become monks for four days. The Gubhāju alone have the right to practise as Buddhist domestic priests, and both in function and in status they are a close replica of the Hindu Brahmans (Greenwold 1974:101-23). The Śākya, though they may not become household priests, are nevertheless 'pure' Buddhists; indeed, they claim direct descent from the Śākya clan that gave birth to Śākyamuni Buddha. But the traditional occupation of most Śākya and many Gubhāju, that of gold-smithing, involves a number of highly polluting activities, in particular the melting of gold in order to separate it from other metals.

The somewhat surprising equation between royal Taleju and Śākya Kumārī may reflect a desire on the part of the Malla kings to give their imported lineage deity increased legitimacy through association with the long-established and much revered Kumārī. All of the stories portray the king as having lost favour with his protecting deity, a fact which may reflect some weakness in his political position. The reappearance of Taleju as Kumārī in the form of a young Buddhist girl had the important result of projecting the source of royal legitimacy outside the palace. This feature of the cult undoubtedly gained in importance when the Gorkhas conquered the Newars and they too found it desirable to acknowledge the legitimating function of the Śākya Kumārī of Kathmandu. Virtually every history textbook in the country recounts how, when Prithwi

Narayan Shaha, the conquering Gorkha king, entered Kathmandu during the annual Kumārī festival, he first received *prasād* or blessing from the goddess and then decreed that the festival should continue. It is this event that above all else is represented as conferring legitimacy on the new dynasty—a symbolic act of great importance repeated annually during her festival when the King comes to her house to kiss her feet and to receive *tikā* from her. The legitimating function of this exchange is evident in the many tales that are told of a change of ruler or even dynasty following some irregularity. For example, in 1955 the goddess, who seemed to be dozing, wrongly placed the *tikā* on the forehead of the crown prince rather than the king. Eight months later King Tribhuvan died and his son Mahendra was crowned (Anderson 1971:135).

Since each of the principal Kumārīs in the three capital cities is still regarded as, amongst other things, a living form of Taleju Bhavānī, it is worth pausing a moment to consider the nature of this goddess. According to the chronicles she was first brought to Kathmandu valley by Harisingh Deva, a fourteenth-century Karnatic prince of Tirhut whose capital was at Simraongadh in what is now part of southern Nepal. The appearance of Harisingh in valley politics was a direct consequence of the collapse of Hindu kingdoms in north India due to the rapid expansion of Moslem power. Though historians are uncertain as to whether Harisingh actually ruled the country from Bhadgaon or simply exercised some kind of influence at court, it seems beyond doubt that it was during this period that Taleju Bhavānī was established as the tutelary divinity of Nepalese monarchs. During the fourteenth century there was only one valley kingdom with its capital at Bhadgaon, and it was here that Harisingh reputedly built her temple in the palace compound. It was not until after Yaksha Malla made a tripartite division in the early fifteenth century that additional Taleju temples were built, first in Kathmandu in AD 1501 and then in Patan in AD 1620. In each of the three cities her temple stands in the old palace compound, and they are still the scene of massive sacrificial rites during Dasai(n). As I will shortly describe, new royal Kumārīs are installed in office in courtyards immediately adjacent to the Taleju temples, and for her Hindu worshippers it is the spirit of this goddess who is invoked to enter the young girls.

Bhavānī, which literally means 'giver of existence', is one of the many epithets of *śakti* or Devī, the consort of Śiva. In those areas, such as the Deccan in central India, where she receives special veneration as an independent deity, her attributes are similar to those normally associated with Durgā and Kālī. Though Durgā is commonly represented as beautiful and calm while Kālī is ugly and frenzied, the two are alike in that they are both powerful blood-lusting destroyers of male demons and enemies. The fearsome Kālī aspect of Bhavānī is that which was most apparent in the notorious Thuggee cult, while that of beautiful protectress was stressed in her appearance as the tutelary divinity of leading Maratha families. By far the most famous of the many Indian Bhavānī temples is that of Tuljapur, a small town in Hyderabad. Though an ancient place of pilgrimage, it was not until the Bhosle family began to worship her in the late sixteenth century that she acquired widespread fame. Śivaji, the most famous of the Maratha rulers regularly consulted with Taleju Bhavānī prior to undertaking any important action, and in AD 1658 he built a new and most impressive temple for her at Pratapgad. As in Nepal, the goddess is represented as the main source of the ruler's strength and wisdom (Kincaid and Parasnis 1918:113-15, 152, 158-9, 210-11 and 53-78).

The Kumārī-Taleju equation is spelt out most vividly in two contexts: at the installation ceremony for new royal Kumārīs, and during the annual sacrifice of hundreds of buffaloes and goats to Taleju during Dasai(n). The two are closely linked for the installation ceremony must take place immediately after the mass animal sacrifice.

Selection and installation

The selection of the new royal Kumārī is a complex affair controlled by a formal committee of eight ritual specialists.⁸ Those

⁸ The committee consists of the Bada Guruju (the chief Brahman of the country who holds a palace appointment as the king's adviser on religious matters), the Ācāhju priest of Taleju temple, the Royal astrologer and the Pañca Buddha. The Pañca Buddha are five Newar Buddhist priests of Vajrācārya caste who also officiate during the annual Kumārī festival and have various other ceremonial duties in connection with the goddess. They consist of two Raj Gubhājus, one from Sikhamu Bāhāh and the other from Saval Bāhāh and three other Gubhājus

eligible to be chosen are the daughters of all male Śākya who have membership of one of the 15 main ex-monasteries (*bāhāḥs*) of Kathmandu. About a month prior to Dasai(n) the candidates are examined by the selection committee in a room in Hanuman Dhoka, the old Malla palace. I understand that despite the high prestige and continuing popularity of the position, only about four or five girls reach this stage. The difficult selection criteria are widely known and only those obviously well qualified are submitted. The formal task of the committee is to find a girl who exhibits all the 32 perfections⁹ expected of a female deity.

Some of these, for example, forty teeth (i.e. the lost milk teeth plus the full adult set), a chest like a lion, thighs like a deer and a body like a banyan tree are not features one might expect to find in a three or four year-old girl. In fact, a much shorter and simpler list is used in which the keynote is youthful purity. The first concern is that the child should be in perfect health and have avoided any serious illness, especially smallpox. Great stress is placed on skin with a good lustre and no blemish or scar, oval face with large black eyes and long lashes, nicely proportioned limbs, toes and fingers, no bad body smells and above all that she should have lost no teeth and be pre-menstrual. Some also say that she should be fully weaned and

of Sikhamu. The Raj Gubhājus hold hereditary positions that date back to the Malla period, when they carried the authority of the king to settle disputes amongst the Newar Buddhists.

⁹ The following list was given to me by a Vajrācārya informant:

(1) Feet well-proportioned. (2) Spiralling lines on the soles of the feet. (3) Nails well-proportioned. (4) Long and well-formed toes. (5) Feet and hands like those of a duck (with netlike lines). (6) Feet and hands soft and firm. (7) The body broad at the shoulders and narrow at the waist. (8) Thighs like those of a deer. (9) Small and well-recessed sexual organs. (10) Chest like that of a lion. (11) Well-spread shoulders. (12) Long arms. (13) Pure body. (14) Neck like a conch shell. (15) Cheeks like those of a lion. (16) Forty teeth (the first eight milk teeth and 32 second teeth). (17) Teeth white and nicely shaped. (18) No gaps between teeth. (19) Tongue small and sensitive. (20) Tongue moist. (21) Voice clear and soft like a duck's. (22) Eyes blue/black. (23) Eyelashes like those of a cow. (24) A beautiful complexion with white lustre. (25) A gold-coloured complexion. (26) Skin pores small and not too open. (27) Hair-whorls stiff and turning to the right. (28) Hair black. (29) Forehead large and well-proportioned. (30) Head round with cone-shaped top. (31) Body shaped like a banyan tree. (32) Robust body.

have learned how to walk—no doubt practical considerations in view of her immanent separation from her mother. In addition to the physical signs the committee is supposed to consider her personality—especially that she should show a fearless and calm disposition. They also carefully consider her family's genealogical background and general repute in order to be certain that she is of unblemished Śākya stock. A final and most important consideration is her horoscope—it must be examined not only in terms of her own auspiciousness, but also in order to ascertain that it does not in any way conflict with that of the King. This is to guarantee that he will not place himself in jeopardy when he comes to worship her during her festival.

The selected girl returns to her home where she stays until the final tests and rites of installation are performed. During this period the spirit of Kumārī is believed to be already slowly entering into her so that if she should be in any way unsuitable then her body is certain to react negatively.

Dasai(n) is a ten-day long festival on the first nine of which the Nava Durgā, the nine separate forms of this powerful mother goddess, are worshipped at their various local shrines. On *mahā aṣṭamī*, the 'great eighth' day of Dasai(n), the slaying of the arch demon Maḥiṣāsura by Durgā is celebrated throughout the country by the sacrifice of thousands of buffaloes, goats, sheep, chickens and ducks. It is most especially in Mūcuka, a small inner courtyard in Hanuman Dhoka that leads to the adjacent Taleju temple, that Durgā's triumph is re-enacted. At nightfall eight buffaloes representing the demon are killed by having their throats slit so that the blood jets high towards the shrine that contains the Taleju icon. A few hours later at about midnight a further 54 buffaloes and 54 goats are killed in a similar manner. As may well be imagined, the small courtyard is by then awash with blood. Some of the heads are placed in and around the Taleju shrine and the entrance is turned into a truly gory sight with dripping blood, hanging entrails and nailed up skulls with attached horns. The remaining heads, with lighted wicks placed between the horns, are set out in rows across the courtyard. At this point, usually about 1.00 a.m., the small Kumārī-elect is brought to the entrance. She is supposed to walk by herself in a clockwise direction around the raised edge until she

reaches the bloody Taleju shrine. She must enter it, still maintaining a perfectly calm demeanour, and if all is well she is then taken upstairs to a small room for the installation ceremony. The officiating low-caste Ācāḥju priests of Taleju maintain a strict rule of secrecy regarding subsequent events. There are, however, good reasons to believe that they must be similar to those that occur at the installation of a Patan Kumārī. If so, then after the usual purificatory and other preliminary rites, the chief priest performs the main ceremony in which he removes from the girl's body all of her previous life's experience so that the spirit of Taleju may enter a perfectly pure being. The girl sits naked in front of the priest while he purifies each of her sensitive body areas in turn by reciting a *mantra* and by touching each area with a small bundle of such pure things as grass, tree bark and leaves. The six sensitive parts are her eyes, throat, breasts, navel, vagina and vulva. As he removes the impurities the girl is said to steadily become redder and redder as the spirit of the goddess enters into her.

At this stage the girl is dressed and made up with Kumārī hairstyle, red *tikā*, third eye, jewellery, etc., and then sits on her beautifully carved wooden throne on the seat of which the priest has painted the powerful *śrī yantra maṇḍala* of Taleju. She also holds the sword of Taleju and it is at this point that the final and complete transformation takes place. It is worth noting that though from now until her disqualification some years later she will be continuously regarded as Kumārī, it is also believed that it is only when fully made up and sitting on her throne that identification is complete. At other times, especially when casually playing with friends, she is partly herself and partly Kumārī.

From the Hindu point of view the rituals performed in Mūcuka complete the installation of Kumārī, but for the Newar Buddhists, and it should be remembered that they constitute the majority of her worshippers, the serious part of proceedings has yet to come. Though they do not dispute the belief that Kumārī is a virginal form of Taleju, she is for them more importantly identified with Vajradevī, the chief female divinity of Vajrayāna Buddhism. After she returns to Kumārī house from Mūcuka she is taken to the shrine on the second floor where two leading Gubhāju priests worship her

as Vajradevī, the sexual partner of Cakrasaṃvara, a fearsome many-armed deity who also figures prominently in Tibetan Buddhism.

I would at this point like to stress the marked contrast between the initial selection procedures in which the aim was to find a pure young virgin, one who above all else had not yet bled in any kind of way, and the installation rites in which the scene itself is one of extreme goriness and the goddesses invoked to possess the girl are both mature and bloodthirsty.

Disqualification

After the installation ceremony the girl remains as Kumārī until she shows some clear sign that she is human rather than divine. The most certain indication is loss of blood, which may be provoked by loss of tooth, first menstruation, a wound, or internal haemorrhage. Serious illness, especially if, like smallpox, it results in body scarring, also causes disqualification. Girls mostly remain in office about six or seven years, the first menstruation being the most common disqualification. This clearly indicates that loss of tooth is not by itself taken too seriously. One ex-Kumārī whom I interviewed, a fifty-six year old woman who had been in office for ten years from the age of four to fourteen, told me that in her case no negative sign had appeared and that she was falsely disqualified on the grounds of suspected menstruation. When I asked her about her teeth she admitted that she had lost most of her first ones, but that this had been considered acceptable because the new teeth had already broken through and were clearly visible. Her milk teeth, she explained, simply fell out with neither loss of blood nor unseemly gap.

I found evidence that despite the apparent strictness with which disqualifying signs are supposed to be observed, when, as occasionally happens, incumbents remain in office until well past puberty, this is regarded with at least as much awesome veneration as critical comment. The current Patan Kumārī, who is the second most important in the country, is an outstanding example. She became Kumārī when four and is now (1976) reputedly twenty-two. Most agree that she must not only have lost her milk teeth, but also have had her first menstruation many years ago. Cynics, of whom there are certainly quite a few, assume that she remains in office

simply because there are no willing successors. This could well be so for though she has great prestige in Patan, she has no national following and there is small material reward for the difficult life. Others, however, take great pride in such a remarkable Kumārī and attribute to her unusual powers. For example, she is said to be able to drink six glasses of pure alcoholic spirit without adverse effect. Some even favour the theory that no disqualifying sign has appeared.¹⁰

Lifestyle and worship

The Kathmandu royal Kumārī must, for as long as she remains in office, live apart from her family in a most imposing official residence located next to the old Malla palace. It is built in the style of one of the Buddhist ex-monasteries and with only one important exception—its resident deities and other sacra are Buddhist. The main downstairs shrine contains the Pañca (i.e., five) or Dhyani Buddha, the first floor shrine the Tantric couple Vajradevī and Cakrasaṃvara, and in the courtyard there are a number of specifically Buddhist structures. The interesting exception is the presence of numerous wood carvings of Durgā killing a demon on the tympanums over the courtyard doors—an unequivocal declaration to visitors that the resident deity is the powerful Hindu goddess.

Kumārī must remain in this building other than on those few occasions when she goes out to attend certain public festivals. She is looked after by a caretaker family of Gubhāju caste which currently consists of an old widow, her 4 married sons and their wives and 32 grandchildren. They share the daily tasks of washing, dressing, feeding and entertaining the young goddess. In theory she is wholly autonomous: if she wishes to have certain playmates they must be found; if they annoy her they should be removed or punished; if she does not wish to be worshipped in a certain way or perhaps even not worshipped at all, then her devotees must act in accordance with her wishes. In practice, if she should begin to act in an excessively

¹⁰ This remarkable Kumārī in fact remained in office until 1989. By then aged 35, she was finally disqualified as the result of a formal enquiry conducted by a committee established at the request of the Crown Prince. For a detailed discussion of these later years see Allen 1996:44-8.

capricious or disruptive manner someone would undoubtedly move to have her dismissed on the grounds of ungodlike behaviour.

Kumārī must always wear red clothes, have her hair drawn up on the top of her head in the distinctive Kumārī style, have a third eye on her forehead, and wear a pair of gold bracelets. But on formal occasions, especially for her annual chariot festival, her appearance is truly grand. In addition to an impressive quantity of jewellery donated both by past kings and by wealthy private admirers, she wears brilliant scarlet clothes, has a huge red *tikā* on her forehead and striking black eye make-up. It is worth noting that the formal title of a princess (daughter of a King, both before and after marriage) is Adhiraj Kumārī.

Each morning, after she has been washed and dressed, she is taken to her throne where she is worshipped by the Hindu priest of the Taleju temple. Later, during the day, members of the public come to worship her. She makes frequent appearances at a window for groups of tourists in the courtyard, has long play sessions with the grand-children of her caretaker, and is given some formal tuition in school subjects from a private tutor. On an average day about ten to twenty people come to worship her. There are no formal requirements: some come with a simple bowl of offerings, usually sweets and flowers, in the normal manner of worshipping a temple deity; some make more elaborate offerings of cooked food, cloth and money, and perhaps recite a few texts; others bring their family priest to conduct a major ceremony. Devotees come from a very wide range of Nepalese society, include both Hindus and Buddhists, and range from simple peasants to prominent government officials. Though most are Newar, many members of other ethnic groups also visit her. The only persons not permitted to approach her are untouchables and foreigners.

Foremost amongst her worshippers are those who suffer from bleeding problems: women with menstrual difficulties, those with chronic haemorrhage, or who habitually cough blood. A second category consists of those who have recently participated in a ceremony in which it is regarded as desirable to conclude with *kumārī pūjā*. Though this is true of virtually all ritual occasions, for without *kumārī pūjā* all that went before would be rendered powerless or futile, only a very few of the participants actually

worship a living Kumārī—most simply perform the *pūjā* to some icon or image, whichever is most convenient. Occasionally, public servants and even government ministers, especially those who are in fear either of loss of job or demotion, are to be found amongst those who come to make offerings to the royal Kumārī. A further category consists of those who believe that she has the power to foretell future events; especially whether or not a client's proposed action is likely to prosper. In each of the above contexts she is specifically worshipped as Kumārī and hence the emphasis is primarily, though even here not without some ambiguity, on her overt role as pure young virgin. Quite the opposite holds for those who invite a living Kumārī to attend either Hindu or Buddhist privately-organized Tantric rituals. On such occasions the young girl is used as a suitable vessel or container for the spirit of some other goddess, usually mature, beautiful and passionate. In Hindu Tantric rituals such goddesses are most commonly one of the forms of *śakti* or Devī, while in Vajrayāna rituals they are most likely to be one of the red and naked *yoginīs* or *dākinīs*, in particular Vajradevī. In such rites it is the full power of Kumārī's delayed sexual and creative potential that is especially venerated. Though physically a pure young virgin, she is nevertheless charged with the power of erotic and reproductive womanhood.

When a Kathmandu royal Kumārī has been declared unfit for office, she should return to family life as an ordinary girl. After proceeding through the usual life-cycle rituals such as the twelve-day isolation for first menstruation, she is expected to advance to the rituals and exchanges that culminate in marriage. But inevitably there are difficulties both for others to accept her as an ordinary human and for her to adjust to the radically new role required of her. For a considerable number of formative years she has been treated as a powerful goddess and worshipped by everyone, even the King. She has come to expect that every whim will be satisfied—such as the desire for a new toy, the summoning of playmates or the removal of those who offend. It is important too that she has come to expect that all those who visit her will bear offerings of some kind or other, no matter how humble. Clearly, a prolonged period of this kind does not constitute the ideal socialization for a future Newar wife. Although the position of Newar women, whether as mothers, wives

or sisters is distinctly better than that of most neighbouring Himalayan or north Indian women, it is still quite emphatically one in which service and obedience, especially to husbands, is the keynote. Almost immediately the haughty young goddess must suffer the indignity of menstrual isolation. Then as soon as she marries, she must enter that most difficult phase as the young girl who should serve and even worship her husband. Instead of having the King bow annually to her feet, she must now do so daily to her husband's.

It is small wonder that there is a widespread belief that marriage to an ex-royal Kumārī will prove disastrous for any but the strongest of men. In addition to a personality that is likely to differ markedly from that expected of the ideal humble wife, there is a strong belief that such girls retain something of their former power. That this is so is evident in that all ex-Kumārīs are addressed for the rest of their lives as *dyah meiju*—or 'deity female'. Some say that this continuing power is so strong that it may even kill a weak husband, and hence early widowhood is thought to be a common fate. Another common stereotype is that some ex-Kumārīs have been obliged to marry men of lower caste than themselves. In actual fact, five of the last ten royal Kumārīs have married men of their own caste, and thus far seem to have adjusted to their new status. Only two remained as spinsters until old age, while the two most recent are also single but thought not likely to remain so for long. The remaining ex-Kumārī, who is now a woman of 56, has so far lived a life that gives some substance to the popular image. She reigned as Kumārī for ten years from the age of 4 to 14, and though she eventually married a Śākya man, it was not until she was about 25. After five years, during which she had two daughters, the husband died of some mysterious disease, possibly cancer. She then lived for almost ten years as a widow, and by all accounts caused many raised eyebrows by running a grog shop in the centre of town. She dressed very gaily during this period and whether true or not was suspected of having many lovers. She finally married a man of merchant Śreṣṭha caste, one rung lower than the Śākya but still 'pure' and respectable. She is still married to him, but has had no more children. When I interviewed her in 1974 I was impressed by her forceful personality. She herself readily agreed that ex-Kumārīs

have great difficulty in adjusting to the life of an ordinary woman. Indeed, when she was approached some thirty years ago over the possibility of offering one of her own daughters for selection as Kumārī she flatly refused, and just recently has discouraged the candidacy of her grand-daughter.

The ambiguous and dangerous virgin

From the data thus far presented it is evident that there is a recurrent theme of dangerous sexuality associated with this overtly virginal and pure young goddess. According to her Hindu worshippers she is really Taleju Bhavānī, a mysterious though immensely powerful goddess who destroys male demons and arouses the lust of kings. For her Buddhist worshippers she is Vajradevī, the beautiful blood-drinking sexual consort of Cakrasaṃvara. Indeed, the term Kumārī itself contains something of the goddess' central ambiguity for though it is most commonly understood to refer to a virgin girl in the sense of one as yet undefiled either by menstruation or by sexual intercourse, it also appears in many lists of terms for young girls as applying to the immediate post-menstrual stage. Walker (1968:434), for example, provides a list in which Kumārī is used to refer to a thirteen-year-old girl whose menses had begun two years earlier, while in most Tantric texts a sixteen-year-old girl is deemed most suitable for *kumārī pūjā*. Though the Newars formally insist on the pre-menstrual purity of their living Kumārīs, they nevertheless display some ambivalence through their barely concealed admiration for such mature Kumārīs as the present Patan incumbent.

My argument is not, however, simply that the popularity of Kumārī worship can be understood by reference to her dual nature as pure young virgin and erotic/reproductive woman. The key is rather to be found in the ambiguous evaluation of virginity itself. The virgin girl, though highly rated for her purity, is nevertheless a threat to men and to male sexuality. As Walker has made clear, the basis for the male belief in the power of the virgin lies in the fear of pollution through contact with hymenal blood. Yet in Nepal, as throughout the Hindu world, blood is not only feared and avoided as a polluting substance, but venerated and embraced as a source of

life. Both aspects of blood symbolism are of importance in interpreting the meaning of certain aspects of the Kumārī cult.

The first and most obvious point is that Kumārī as a young premenstrual girl is classed as a 'pure' goddess who must be kept free from any polluting contact with blood. That this is so is evident not only in the criteria of fitness for office, most of which focus on her personal freedom from any form of bleeding, but also in the prohibitions against either contact with menstruating women or the sacrifice of animals in her name. But there are other contexts that indicate a more positive identification with blood and its properties. For example, though she herself must not bleed she has the important ability to halt the flow in others when it threatens their well-being. It should also be noted that Kumārī is classed as a red-coloured deity; in her installation ceremony she becomes redder and redder as the spirit of Taleju enters her, and she must subsequently wear red, scarlet, pink or purple clothes. Her favourite flower is the red hibiscus, she must wear a huge red *tikā* on her forehead, and her toes are purified with red paint.

Her ambiguous relationship with blood is perhaps best seen in the context of animal sacrifice. Though no sacrifice may be made direct to Kumārī she is nevertheless possessed by the spirit of the blood-lusting Taleju. On her installation night she is surrounded by the bloody heads and entrails of the animals sacrificed to Taleju, and throughout her tenure of office she must annually revisit this gory scene in Mūcuka.

The importance of blood symbolism is by no means confined to the Kumārī cult. This is apparent not only in the massive animal sacrifices that take place annually at Dasai(n), but also in the manner in which the animals are killed. Unlike all neighbouring peoples in the Himalayas, who remove their victims' heads with a single blow of a curved knife, the Newars kill their animals as slowly as possible by holding the neck back and giving the jugular vein a tiny nick. The aim is to ensure that a hot jet of blood can be so directed into the mouth of the deity that it can be drunk direct from a still living animal. The victim is then beheaded and the body dragged around the temple courtyard leaving a bloody trail behind it.

The negative or polluting attributes of blood are most apparent in the beliefs and associated rituals concerning menstruation. All

Newar girls of 'pure' caste are required to undergo a ceremony called *bārāy* prior to marriage. The *bārāy* may be performed either as a group ritual (*bārāy tayegu*) in which several girls jointly participate prior to their first menstruation, or as an individual *rite de passage* held when the girl has her first menses. In both types of ceremony the girl is confined for eleven days in a dark room in her family home. Special care is taken to ensure that the sun does not enter and on the twelfth day when she emerges she is brought blindfolded to a place in full view of the sun where she offers it flowers and rice. The blindfold is then removed and she looks at the sun. It should be remembered that the sun, Sūrya, is a male god and that it is he, together with all of the men of her household, who are protected by the *bārāy* ritual from the dangers of the girl's menstrual blood. Greenwold recently recorded the following most interesting statement made by a Vajrācārya informant:

A girl during her first menstrual period releases some poisons from her womb. If this is exposed to the sun, the sun itself would become impure. If this poison is exposed to her male kinsmen, her brothers or her father and uncles, they would become impure and also might suffer many misfortunes. ... In the same way the Pore and Chyami (two Newar sweeper castes of unclean status) are full of poison and are unclean and polluted. (Greenwold 1974:119)

The threatening power of a girl undergoing her seclusion is dramatically represented in the figure of the *bārāy khyāḥ*, a cotton effigy of a part-deity part-spirit which is believed to possess the girl and is hung on the wall of the seclusion room. The *khyāḥ* is a bodyguard of Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth and is commonly represented as a dwarfed and pudgy figure who is black in colour with curly hair and red-pouting lips. Some say that he actually possesses the girl and is therefore a grave danger to her well-being during the period of seclusion; others are of the opinion that he provides her with companionship and amusement, possibly of a sexual kind. Either way, he is essential for the success of the ritual and each day he must be offered food.

An unusual feature of Newar menstrual tabus is that they are almost wholly confined to the first menses. Most orthodox Hindus, including the Parbatiyā Brahman and Chetri peoples of Kathmandu

valley, require the isolation of women throughout each bleeding period. It is not until after a purifying bath on the fourth day that Parbatiyā women can cook food and they must wait a day further before attending to religious duties. Amongst the Newars, by contrast, the only restriction placed on a menstruating woman is that she must have a bath before cooking and she should keep away from the household shrines. Though it is likely that most men refrain from sexual intercourse there is no formal tabu and little or no sense of danger. In other words, for the Newars the dangerous and polluting power associated with menstrual blood is almost wholly confined to its initial occurrence in virgin girls. The purifying effect of the *bārāy tayegu* is so efficacious that men need have little to fear from all future menses.

The Newar men do not, however, rely solely on this ritual to make their women into safe sexual partners. Like the Nayars, they require all girls of 'pure' caste to undergo a mock-marriage with a non-mortal spouse. The *ihī* is an elaborate two-day ceremony during which some 20 to 30 pre-menstrual girls are symbolically married to a bel fruit, a bitter quince that is throughout the Hindu world especially associated with Śiva. There is no indigenous explanation for this remarkable ceremony other than to stress its necessity both for the good of the girl herself and the safety of her future husband. It is regarded as the girl's true marriage and hence enables her to obtain a divorce and to remarry as a widow whilst remaining eternally married to a divine spouse. As amongst the Nayars, and most probably wherever analogous mock-marriages are performed in India, girls enter into their secondary 'real' marriages at a post-menstrual stage. The average age for Newar girls at marriage is sixteen (Nepali 1965:201-3) and there is good reason to believe that this is not just a modern development. Furthermore, in both societies the *de facto* secondary unions are not the eternal and indissoluble bonds that they are amongst orthodox Hindus. Just as the *bārāy* first menstruation ceremony appears to have obviated the need for any subsequent menstrual precautions of a significant kind, so too has the *ihī* ceremony freed Newar men and women from the normal restrictions of an orthodox Hindu marriage.

Like both Gough (1955) and Yalman (1963) I am arguing that the combined effect of the two ceremonies is to negate the powerful

ritual dangers associated with pre-menstrual virgins. Whereas Gough contended that the danger arises through the identification of virgin girl with incestuously desired and castrating mother, I side rather with Yalman in attributing it to the polluting attributes of the pubescent girl's approaching sexual maturity. Gough supported her argument by noting that the chief Nayar deity, Bhagavatī, is both 'mother' and 'virgin'. Even though the Newar Taleju is a form of Durgā or Kālī and hence closely related to Bhagavatī, there is little that I can see of the truly maternal in any of these goddesses—Bhagavatī included. On the contrary, they are all normally depicted as beautiful young women of a sexually desirable kind. In other words, the danger that enters the young virgin at the Kumārī installation rite and is finally removed at the *bārāy* ceremony is essentially the danger of sexual maturity in an unmarried girl. That such a danger should take a highly developed form in a caste-structured society is, as Yalman has persuasively argued, a logical consequence of hierarchy based on notions of relative purity.¹¹

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¹¹ See Chapter 8 of this volume for a more detailed description and analysis of the *ihī* and *bārāy tayegu* rites.

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