

Original Article

Tradition, Modernity, and the Female Body: A Critical Study of the Kumari Tradition in Nepal

Priyanshi Poddar

Woodstock School, Nepal.

Corresponding Author : Priyanshipoddar@woodstock.ac.in

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Abstract - Recently, international movements advocating for gender equality and children's rights have gained widespread support. Simultaneously, we find the existence of a centuries-old tradition of the Kumari in Nepal, where young girls are worshipped as living goddesses. The research paper examines the impact of the tradition on children and women across Nepal by investigating the social and cultural viewpoints and gender dynamics embedded within the tradition. Through detailed interviews and structured surveys conducted among citizens of Nepal, the paper explores personal beliefs, generational divides, and social attitudes toward the continuation of the tradition. The findings revealed a concern for the loss of childhood experiences faced by the Kumari, specially through an educational and social viewpoint. However, despite these concerns, a significant majority of the respondents supported the continued existence of the tradition, including acceptance and adherence to the 35 physical characteristics checked during selection. By analyzing these finances, the paper reveals how the Kumari tradition explored the complexities of the modern human rights framework while highlighting the tension between cultural preservation and the evolving discourse on children's rights and gender equality.

Keywords - Kumari tradition, Women's rights, Cultural heritage, Child rights, Nepali tradition.

1. Introduction

Imagine waking up as an ordinary young girl in a loving family, only to find yourself referred to as a living goddess by nightfall. This is a remarkable reality for the Kumari-the only living goddess in the world. While there are several theories of how the tradition first began, including the Taleju legend, the King Jay Prakash Malla Legend, and the Possessed Girl Legend, the tradition of the Kumari began in the 17th century, during the Malla Dynasty in Nepal (Marchan, 2022). The origin of the word Kumari can be found in Sanskrit, meaning “princess” or a “young girl”, the word is colloquially used to denote a virgin or prepubescent girl, who in this tradition is believed to be the physical embodiment of the Hindu Goddess Taleju and the Buddhist deity Vajradevi (Gellner, 2018; Gellner & Hausner, 2014). Often referred to as the “protector of the Kingdom of Nepal,” the Kumari is worshipped and feared by thousands. Selected through ancient and rigorous criteria, the Kumari serves as a living goddess until she reaches puberty or loses any of her milk teeth. At this point, she is replaced by another young girl who fulfils the divine role. At present, there are eleven living Kumaris in Nepal, each chosen to protect different towns from evil powers (Bhattarai & Shrestha, 2010). The three most important Kumari are associated with the main towns of the Kathmandu Valley: Patan, Bhaktapur, and Kathmandu, with the Kumari of Kathmandu being the most influential and revered. Eligible

girls must be from the Newar Shakya caste, and some of the other selection criteria of the Kumari include examinations of the 32 physical attributes, her horoscope, the marital status of up to three generations of her family, and a fearlessness test (Sigdel, 2021). Residing in the Kumari Ghar, Kathmandu's Durbar Square, she is expected to participate in religious ceremonies, offer blessings, and play a crucial role in festivals such as Indra Jatra and Dashain (Sharma, 2021). Her followers include devout Hindus, Buddhists, and Newars from across Nepal, including a large number of tourists who visit the Darbar every day. These worshippers believe that being blessed by the Kumari can bring good fortune, health, and protection from evil spirits.

The Kumari tradition, which is known for its practice of selection and replacement of prepubescent girls, emphasizes the significance of the tradition and the divine goddess it represents rather than the individual child's well-being or the need to provide her with a balanced childhood. This practice raises important questions about gender and reflects broader societal attitudes towards women, often shaping their lives and societal roles. Considering its deep cultural importance, the existing scholarship has primarily focused on the origins and relevance of the tradition, particularly the process of selection and the continuing popularity of the tradition; nevertheless, there has been limited research that outlines the



nature, perception and extent to which the tradition holds popularity amongst ordinary Nepali citizens. Using a mixed methods approach, this study employed a structured survey with 70 respondents to explore the understanding, relevance, and perceptions towards the Kumari tradition and its larger impact on women's rights, gender perception, and child rights. This was complemented by 10 in-depth interviews conducted among believers of the tradition, which sought to explore the above concepts in greater detail. As a widely popular tradition, this paper offers a nuanced understanding of how the tradition is perceived and debated within Nepalese society. It situates the Kumari practice within the larger discourse on women's roles and agency. It examines how the tradition is questioned, whether it is viewed as problematic, and what these discussions reveal about the interplay between modernity and cultural heritage.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. History of Kumari Tradition

The tradition is believed to have originated during the reign of King Jay Prakash Malla, the last ruler of the Malla dynasty in Nepal. According to legend, the king played Triopasa, a dice game, with the Goddess, who provided him with divine counsel on state affairs. However, one night, the king developed a desire for the goddess, enraged her and made her withdraw divine protection from his kingdom, leading to political and social unrest (Paudel 2022). Eventually, the goddess appeared to him in a dream, instructing him that she would only return in the form of a prepubescent girl with 32 divine qualities and would belong to the Shakya Clan. As a response, he started the tradition of the Royal Kumari of Kantipur and constructed the Kumari Ghar, where the Kumari remains even today (Shrestha, 2024). While multiple variations of this legend exist, the central premise remains consistent—the belief that a young girl can embody the divine and serve as the earthly manifestation of the goddess. The Kumari is revered mainly by the Newar community, but considering that devotion to the Kumari is not restricted by caste or religious affiliation, and individuals from diverse backgrounds can seek her blessings, her followers include people locals from diverse social groups in Nepal. Access to the Kumari, however, is regulated by caretakers, who determine the conditions under which devotees are allowed to visit.

2.2. Selecting a Kumari

Evident from the name, only a prepubescent girl can be selected as a Kumari, but not every young girl from the Newar Shakya caste is eligible for selection. The selection of a Kumari is officially carried out by a specially designated Selection Committee that comprises the head priest of the Taleju Bhawani Temple, government officials, astrologers, and other religious and cultural authorities, who are collectively tasked with the rigorous process of identifying and selecting eligible candidates for the role. The selection criteria included several religious, astrological, and cultural

traditions deeply rooted in Nepalese traditions. The first set of selection criteria involves thoroughly examining physical attributes to ensure the chosen Kumari can fulfill her duties successfully. The Female priest is known to check the young girl for 32 physical attributes, some of which include culturally defined specifications for various parts of the child's body - such as "body like a banyan tree (Nyagrodha)", "eyelashes like a cow", "no blemishes, moles, or birthmarks", "voice soft and clear as a duck", "thighs like those of a deer", "small and moist tongue". Such cultural descriptions of different parts of a girl's body not only highlight the objectification inherent in the tradition but also reflect deeply embedded historical and patriarchal constructs surrounding femininity and purity. These criteria, which emphasize specific physical traits as markers of divinity, are rooted in pre-modern gender norms that continue to shape societal perceptions of the female body. It also underscores broader cultural narratives that associate purity, divinity, and worth with rigid bodily expectations, raising critical questions about gender, agency, and tradition in contemporary society.

In addition to such physical attributes, there are specifications that Kumari and her family must fulfill. Like the three generations of the proposed Kumari family are expected not to have been a part of any inter-caste marriage or a house that was previously involved in Ihi-Bel Biha, and the marriages in her family should have been concluded with the twenty-eight Mahabihars of Kathmandu. For the royal kumari of Kathmandu, there are three rounds of selection. In the first, eligible girls are lined up, and a priest conducts Tantric rituals using flower petals or rice grains cast with spells for 5 minutes. The main aim of this ritual is to invite Goddess Taleju into the body of the girl she considers most suitable. It is argued that if chosen, the girl's body will start presenting physical signs of the divine presence through increased body temperature, redness on the face, and rolling in her eyes. These signs are visible to all, and three girls who exhibit them are then considered to have been chosen by the goddess herself.

Once selected, the girls are then taken to the house of the Royal Priest, where his wife takes each girl into separate rooms and checks their naked body for the 32 perfections listed earlier and for any cuts, bruises, or birthmarks that would lead to the girl being illegible. The girl who meets the most number of these physical attributes is selected as the Kumari. In her accounts of the selection process, Chanira Bajracharya, an ex-Kumari, said there has never been a time when they have not found a girl who perfectly meets the 32 physical attributes. After this, the Royal Priest offers a nut to the proposed Kumari. Once she accepts it, her appointment as the Royal Kumari of Kathmandu is considered complete. In certain cases, priests recount following additional practices, such as sacrificing 102 buffaloes; however, this is not officially documented in temple records. Post selection, a Kumari is distinctly clad in red clothing associated with the gods of power, including a bright red Jama (Cloak) and a red

Bhoto (Shirt). She wears coin garlands and two necklaces - one called “Basuki naga,” a long chain reaching up to her belly that is believed to symbolize the goddess of wealth, anger, and the monsoons. A 4-inch-long golden tayo is another ornament worn around her neck to indicate authority over the other goddesses. Additionally, using a mixture of vermillion, crystal rock powder, kumkum, and sesame oil, she wears a red tika in the shape of a third eye on her forehead, which is considered to symbolize the divine power of the goddess and marks enlightenment, inner vision, and mysticism.

It is believed that all these ornaments were made during the rule of the Malla kings and are passed down from one Kumari to the next. On regular days, the Kumari is allowed to wear ordinary red clothes and jewellery her worshippers offer her.

2.3. Female Body As A Site for Worship: Religious Veneration or Structural Inequality

The perception and treatment of women in society have historically been complex and multifaceted, extending beyond a mere comparison with other genders. In South Asia, deeply entrenched cultural norms and structural inequalities perpetuate economic, social, and political disparities. Women in the region face significant disadvantages, such as differential access to jobs, wage disparity, hazardous or difficult working conditions, gendered perception of work, and an unequal burden of unpaid domestic and care work. According to the United Nations, the gender pay gap in South Asia is 11% higher than the global average, and women are more likely than men to be employed in precarious and unsafe conditions. Additionally, women disproportionately engage in unpaid labour. They are more likely to live in poverty compared to men in three out of the seven South Asian countries for which data is available (United Nations, 2016).

Beyond differences in economic opportunities, women in South Asia are also recorded to face significant threats to their safety. In India alone, 38,911 girls were reported to have faced sexual violence in various forms, and approximately 31,000 rape cases were registered in 2022 (Economic Times, 2023), while in China, nearly 40,000 cases of sexual violence were documented in the same year. The prevalence of such crimes underscores the persistent gender-based violence that undermines women's security and well-being in the region. Despite these challenges, there exists a paradox where, on the one hand, women in this region are venerated in religious and cultural traditions as ‘devi’ or goddesses. At the same time, they are subject to widespread structural and sexual violence. The dichotomy between the religious elevation of women and their lived experiences of discrimination is particularly evident in South Asia. Characterized by widespread cultural diversity, many regional societies worship female deities such as Durga, Kali, Lakshmi, and Saraswati and celebrate traditions centred on women's worship. In regions like India and Nepal, Durga Puja and Navratri are widely celebrated,

where the female form is revered, and young girls are honoured with food, gifts, and symbolic cleansing rituals. While these practices seem to reflect societal reverence for women, they also raise critical questions: why does this veneration not translate into greater safety, autonomy, and respect for women in their everyday lives?

The Kumari tradition in Nepal, following the same belief involving the worship of prepubescent girls as ‘living goddesses’ and believed to embody divine purity and spiritual significance, is emblematic of this broader contradiction. While the chosen girl is worshipped as a divine figure, her life and being are simultaneously subjected to strict control by priests and community leaders with limited autonomy. Upon reaching puberty, the same Kumari is stripped of her sacred status, reinforcing the notion that female worth is contingent on purity and youth. This pattern extends beyond religious traditions. Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge and wisdom, is widely revered in India, yet women continue to face systemic barriers to education, political representation, and career advancement. Similarly, in Nepal, despite the progressive legal framework established by the 2015 constitution, which formally recognizes gender equality, there remains a significant gap between legal provisions and societal realities. Many Nepalese women continue to experience domestic violence, restricted access to healthcare, and limited educational opportunities.

This paradox - where women are simultaneously exalted in religious contexts yet denied fundamental rights and protections in daily life-reflects a broader pattern of gendered social control. While, on the one hand, cultural and religious traditions publicly speak of worshipping and honoring women, they simultaneously reinforce patriarchal structures in their rituals and religious proceedings that directly limit women's agency, reinforce purity-based gender norms, and make women vulnerable to deeply embedded systemic inequalities. The worship of female deities and the celebration of young girls as symbols of purity in practice often do not translate into tangible improvements in women's rights, safety, and social standing. Instead, these traditions often serve to reinforce a hierarchical framework in which women's value is conditional, and their autonomy remains constrained. Addressing these contradictions requires legal and policy interventions and a fundamental shift in societal attitudes toward gender and power.

The Kumari tradition stands as one of the most striking manifestations of this paradox between the veneration and subjugation of women in South Asia. While the Kumari is revered as a living goddess, embodying purity and divine power, her role is tightly controlled by religious and societal authorities. Even though revered as a “living goddess”, her life and control remain strictly controlled, and she is instantaneously stripped of her status upon reaching puberty. Despite the tradition's long-standing cultural and historical

significance, there has been limited scholarly engagement with how Nepalese society perceives the Kumari system in contemporary times. Exploring and mapping public perceptions of the Kumari tradition is crucial for understanding how deeply ingrained beliefs about purity, divinity, and gender roles influence societal attitudes toward women. This research will help reveal whether the tradition is seen as a symbol of empowerment or a relic of patriarchal control and whether it aligns with Nepal's evolving discourse

on gender equality. Furthermore, as Nepal undergoes social and political transformations, it is vital to examine whether perspectives on the Kumari tradition are shifting and what these shifts indicate about broader gender dynamics in the country. By analyzing public attitudes, this study will contribute to ongoing discussions on cultural preservation, gender justice, and the intersection of religion and human rights in Nepalese society.

Table 1. Nature of survey respondents

Age	Sample %	Occupation	Sample %	Perceived power of Kumari	Sample %
Below 18	11.3	Business	25.8	Very Powerful	27.4
19-30	17.7	Professionals	46.6	Somewhat Powerful	25.8
31-40	25.8	Students	11.3	Not Powerful	19.4
41-50	35.5	Homemakers	8.1	Not Sure	17.7
51-60	8.1	Not Disclosed	6.5	No response	3.2

3. Research Question

1. To what extent does the Kumari tradition influence societal perceptions of gender, particularly in relation to purity, agency, and gender roles, in Nepalese society
2. How do the followers of the Kumari tradition perceive and uphold physical and purity-based standards, and to what extent do such beliefs shape their perception of women?
3. Are there any differences in perspectives between followers and non-followers of the tradition regarding its contemporary relevance?

4. Research Method

This study uses a mixed methods research design, integrating in-depth qualitative interviews with a structured survey to explore the Kumari tradition and its broader implications on gender perceptions and human rights in Nepalese society. The primary research objective was to examine the extent to which the Kumari tradition influences societal attitudes toward women and their rights. For a quantitative exploration, a structured survey was distributed to over 70 respondents, who were Nepali citizens aged between 16 and 60. Participants were selected based on their familiarity with the tradition, ensuring representation from both followers and non-followers. Recognizing potential biases in responses from individuals residing in Kathmandu-where the tradition is deeply embedded-efforts were made to include participants from all seven provinces of Nepal, thereby capturing regional variations in perception and practice.

The survey consisted of 31 optional questions, and respondents were provided with a clear overview of the study's purpose, data usage, and confidentiality protocols. Participants were informed that their involvement was entirely voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any point without any consequences, and were analyzed in a manner that preserved anonymity, ensuring that participants' views were

accurately represented without alteration. To further enhance the analysis, qualitative insights were gathered through 10 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with Nepalese residents from diverse occupational and social backgrounds. The interviewees included a director specializing in psychology, a violin teacher, a general physician, a schoolteacher, a lawyer, an industry manager, a student, and two individuals associated with hotel management. Including participants across different age groups, ranging from 16 to mid-40s, allowed for an intergenerational analysis of attitudes toward the Kumari tradition.

The semi-structured format ensured that all participants answered a set of core questions while additional questions were tailored to their backgrounds and experiences. For instance, approximately 30% of the individuals who actively practised the tradition were asked more in-depth questions regarding their beliefs and rituals, whereas non-followers were encouraged to provide perspectives on the tradition's societal implications. Interviews were conducted in familiar and comfortable settings, including participants' homes and communal spaces such as schools, to foster candid discussions.

Additionally, field observations were conducted in Bhaktapur and Kathmandu, where the researcher had the opportunity to witness Kumari's presence during her public appearances. An interview was also conducted with a former Kumari; however, due to limitations in access and permissions, not all information could be included in the study. By integrating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, this study offers a comprehensive exploration of the Kumari tradition, allowing for a nuanced understanding of its impact on societal attitudes toward women. The combination of statistical analysis with firsthand narratives provides a holistic examination of the tradition's evolving role within contemporary Nepalese society, shedding light on its cultural, social, and gendered dimensions.

5. Results and Discussion

Apart from the cultural and historical significance, it is important to understand the reasons that motivate people to believe in the Kumari tradition.

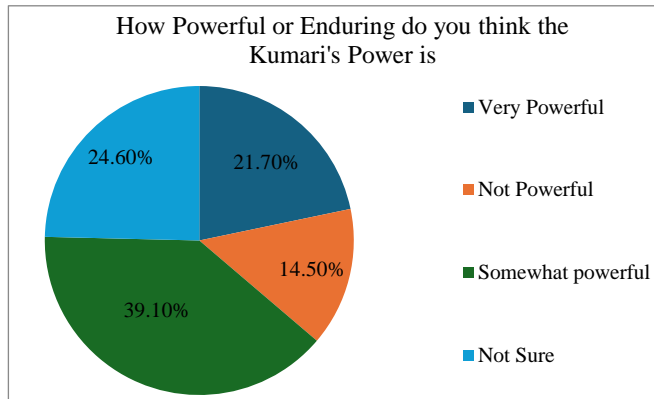


Fig. 1 How powerful or enduring is the kumari's power?

The analysis indicates no significant difference in perceptions of Kumari's power between followers and non-followers of the tradition. While 50% of respondents identify as followers, belief in the Kumari's power remains moderate across both groups. On average, only 15 respondents consider Kumari "very powerful," whereas the majority describe her as "somewhat powerful." These findings suggest that adherence to the tradition does not strongly influence perceptions of Kumari's power, as most respondents-regardless of their affiliation-view her influence as moderate rather than absolute.'

5.1. The Role of Physical Appearance in the Kumari

A critical component in selecting the Kumari involves stringent criteria emphasising physical attributes as indicators of divine purity and worthiness. The following Figure 2 reflects the perspectives of respondents who are followers of the tradition, illustrating the extent to which physical appearance plays a role in the selection and perception of the Kumari. By analyzing their views, this paper seeks to draw insights into how physical attributes, beauty standards, purity, and external attributes are perceived within the tradition and how they reinforce broader gender norms. Additionally, the Figure 3 provides a critical lens through which to examine how such aesthetic ideals shape societal attitudes toward young girls chosen for the role, potentially influencing their identity, social status, and experiences both during and after their tenure as the living goddess. Out of the 70 respondents, approximately 77% were familiar with the practice of physical examination for the selection of a Kumari, while the rest were unaware or unsure about its relevance; however, when asked if they believed that such an examination continues to hold relevance even today, only 37.7% respondents asserted positively, while a significant 50.7% respondents argued against this practice. The decline in the number of respondents agreeing with the relevance of such an assessment reflects the

growing consciousness among Nepali citizens, who, while continuing to remain followers, increasingly question the fairness of such a practice.

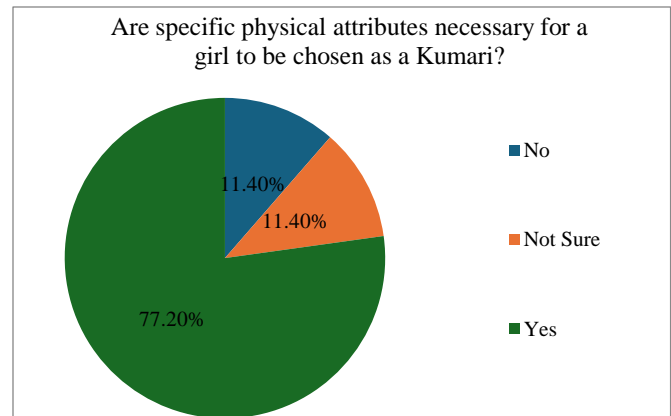


Fig. 2 Should physical attributes determine a kumari's selection?

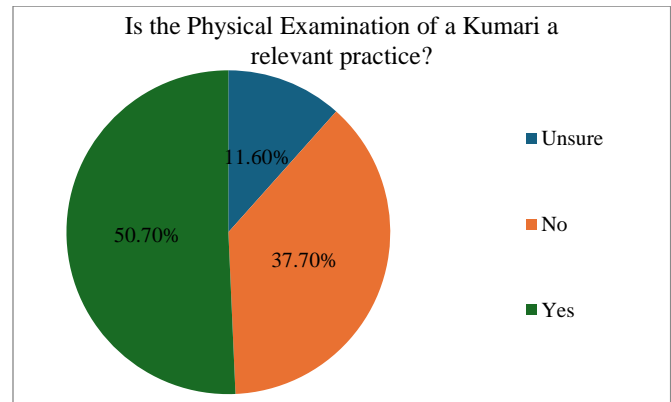


Fig. 3 Relevance of physical examination

It is popularly argued that the goddess only lives in the Kumari until her body is free of any physical blemishes, bruises, and marks. Illustrating the extent to which followers from various age groups believe a Kumari should be removed upon experiencing such physical changes, the following Table 2 aims to explore the generational differences in perspectives towards the necessity of maintaining the Kumari's physical purity.

Table 2. What is the connection between the age group and whether a kumari should be removed if she loses her teeth or gets a bruise? (Physical changes)

Age Group	Yes, it should be removed	No, she should not be removed	It Depends on the Circumstances
Below 18	14.29%	85.71%	0.00%
19-30	33.33%	55.56%	11.11%
31-40	56.25%	31.25%	12.50%
41-50	20.00%	60.00%	20.00%
51-60	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%

Most respondents under the age of 18 believe that a Kumari should not be removed due to physical changes. Among those aged 19-30, the majority were also against removal for such reasons. However, a notable minority (33.33%) supports the idea, reflecting some openness to change among younger adults. In contrast, respondents aged 31-40 and 51-60 feel that a Kumari should be removed if she loses her teeth or sustains a bruise. Respondents aged 41-50 largely oppose removing a Kumari for physical changes. However, a significant portion of them (20.00%) were also unsure. This implies that younger respondents are increasingly more open to change while older age groups widely support the removal of the Kumari - reflecting a generational divide.

5.2. Impact of Menstruation on the Kumari's Journey and Life

After Kumari gets her first period, she is removed from her role as a living goddess and, at nightfall, reverts to her original status as a regular young girl. The following tables and Figure (Table 3, Figure 4, and Table 4) aim to analyze the relationship between the various factors among followers of the tradition, impacting their perspective on when and if the Kumari should be removed from her role upon menstruation. Through such an inquiry, the paper aims to show how different demographic groups perceive the link between purity, femininity, and the divine status of the Kumari.

Table 3. The relationship between age and views on whether or not the kumari should be removed upon menstruation

Age	No	Yes	Depends on circumstances	Unsure
Below 18	80.00%	13.33%	6.67%	0.00%
19-30	55.56%	22.22%	16.67%	5.56%
31-40	38.89%	38.89%	16.67%	5.56%
41-50	42.42%	39.39%	6.06%	12.12%
51-60	30.00%	70.00%	0.00%	0.00%

From the above tables, we find that among respondents aged below 18, 80% believe that Kumari tradition should not be removed, only 13.33% support her removal, and 6.67% indicate that it depends on the circumstances. In the 19-30 age group, 55.56% oppose her removal, 22.22% support it, 16.67% believe it depends on the circumstances, and 5.56% are uncertain. For respondents aged 31-40, opinions are evenly divided, with 38.89% stating she should not be removed and an equal percentage supporting her removal. Additionally, 16.67% believe the decision should depend on the circumstances, while 5.56% remain unsure. In the 41-50 age group, 42.42% oppose her removal, 39.39% support it, 6.06% consider it context-dependent, and 12.12% are uncertain. Finally, among respondents aged 51-60, 30% believe she should not be removed, whereas 70% support her removal. Thus, we observe that the flexibility towards the retention of the Kumari after her menstruation is inversely proportional to

age as older respondents are more stringent towards traditional norms, while younger respondents are more flexible and accepting of menstruation in the physical form of the Kumari once selected.

Table 4. Removing a kumari upon the ONSET of menstruation

Who is eligible to be the Kumari?	Yes, she should be removed upon menstruation	No, she should not be removed from menstruation	Unsure
Any prepubescent girl from a particular caste	54.84%	35.48%	9.68%
Any girl from a specific caste	71.43%	28.57%	42.86%
Any prepubescent girl	33.33%	66.67%	33.33%
Any girl whose family wishes to	50%	0%	50%

Among respondents who believe that any prepubescent girl from a particular caste is eligible to be Kumari, 54.84% support her removal upon reaching puberty, while 35.48% oppose it. Similarly, among those who believe that any girl from a particular caste is eligible, 71.43% support removal, whereas 28.57% do not. In contrast, among those who believe that any prepubescent girl is eligible, 33.33% favor removal, 66.67% oppose it, and 50% remain uncertain. Approximately 60% of the respondents believed that it was essential for Kumari to remain a virgin during and after her selection process, whereas around 30% said it was not essential. Only 20% said maybe, and 1.4% of the respondents were unsure whether she should be a virgin.

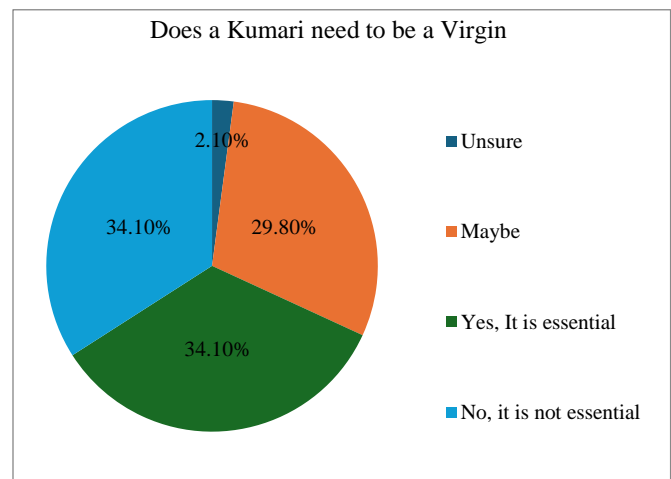


Fig. 4 Connection between kumari and virginity

5.3. The Caste Connection: Does it Really Matter?

The data presented in the table above highlights caste as a significant determinant in selecting a Kumari. Despite the Nepalese Constitution criminalizing caste-based discrimination, caste remains a widely accepted criterion in the selection process. This enduring relevance of caste reflects

broader societal attitudes toward tradition and social hierarchy. Additionally, Table 5 further explores the relationship between caste-based eligibility and respondents' views on whether reforms or changes to the tradition are necessary.

Table 5. Connection between kumari and virginity

How relevant do you think it is for the Kumari to be from a specific caste?	Do you think there should be changes or reforms to the Kumari tradition?		
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Maybe (%)
Extremely Relevant	15%	10%	0%
Somewhat relevant	12.5%	12.5%	0%
Not sure	25%	15%	5%
Somewhat irrelevant	20%	17.5%	7.5%
Completely irrelevant	15%	20%	2.5%

Respondents who viewed caste as extremely relevant had mixed opinions on reforms, with 15% supporting changes, 10% opposing them, and none selecting "Maybe." Among those who found it somewhat relevant, 12.5% supported reforms, an equal 12.5% opposed them, and no one was uncertain. For unsure respondents, 25% favoured reforms-the highest level of support-while 15% opposed them, and 5% were undecided. Those who considered caste somewhat irrelevant showed a more balanced view, with 20% supporting reforms, 17.5% opposing them, and 7.5% uncertain. Finally, among those who found caste completely irrelevant, 15% favored changes, 20% opposed them, and 2.5% were unsure.

5.4. Beyond the Norm: The Influence of Personal Beliefs

Interviews and questionnaires reveal that perspectives on the Kumari tradition extend beyond traditional laws and conventions. They are shaped by upbringing, familiarity with the tradition, and belief in the Kumari's power. Figure 5 illustrates whether respondents would be comfortable with their daughter being selected as a Kumari. This analysis highlights the tension between ideological support for the tradition and personal reluctance to have one's child experience it.

Despite strong beliefs in its significance, physical examination, and caste requirements, respondents may hesitate when considering the implications for their daughters. This analysis also reveals how respondents think the tradition impacts how people view young girls, women, and society and whether they would be comfortable with having their daughter as a Kumari. Through this, the paper aims to draw parallels between support for their daughter being a kumari and personal reluctance. If respondents believe the Kumari tradition empowers young girls, why would they-or wouldn't they-allow their daughter to become one? Conversely, if they oppose the idea for their child, does this suggest concerns about gender roles, societal expectations, or personal freedoms within the tradition?

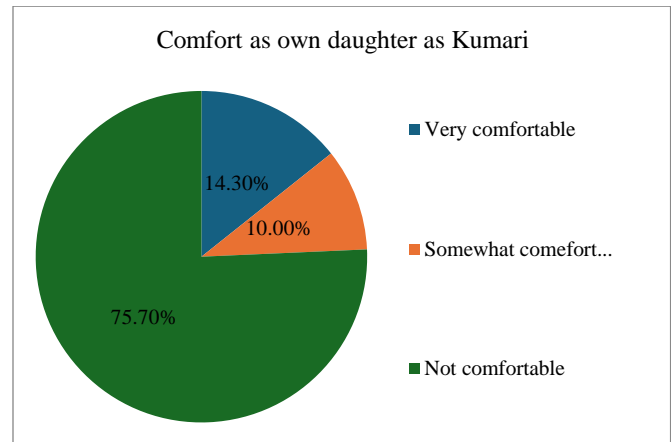


Fig. 5 Level of comfort with one's own daughter as a kumari

Approximately 75.7% of the respondents stated they would not be comfortable if their daughter was selected as a kumari, while 10% said maybe, and only 14.3% said yes. Further, when asked how tradition influences societal views on young girls and women, respondents spoke of cultural impact in terms of shaping norms and values, gender roles, influencing perceptions of power and identity, societal expectations defining behavior and appearance standards, and respect and reverence, enhancing respect for women and girls.

5.5. Perceptions of Rituals and Ceremonies in the Kumari Tradition - Significance and Meaning

An important aspect of followers' belief in the Kumari tradition is the significance they attribute to its rituals and ceremonies. Figure 6 presents the perspectives of respondents who identify as followers, illustrating the varying degrees of importance assigned to different rituals. Approximately 40% of respondents derived their beliefs from family stories passed down through generations, while 34% were influenced by narratives and experiences shared within their local community. Additionally, 8.6% formed their views based on personal reflections on the tradition's impact, and 9% relied on personal observations. In contrast, 5.7% reported no

specific experiences that shaped their beliefs. Through this analysis, the paper explores the extent to which personal interactions-whether through direct engagement with the Kumari, participation in ceremonies, or communal influences-contribute to differing perspectives on the tradition.

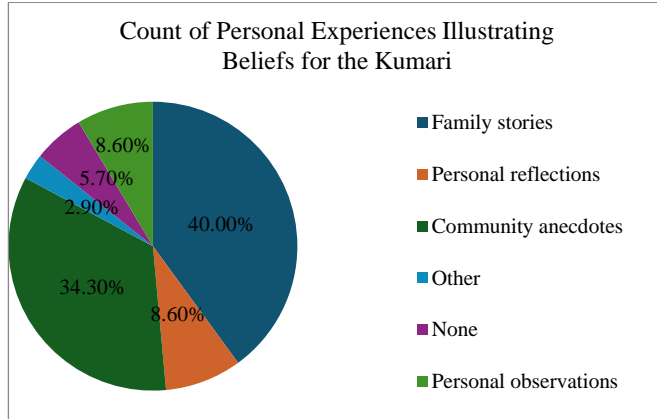


Fig. 6 Exploring rituals and ceremonies that hold meaning in the kumari tradition

5.6. Living the Legacy: How the Kumari Tradition Shapes Her Life and Millions Around Her

Beyond the few thousand followers of the tradition in Nepal, this section analyses the broader impact of the tradition on young girls and women around the world. Survey respondents were asked to reflect on how the Kumari tradition shapes societal attitudes toward gender roles, respect, cultural identity, and expectations placed on young girls and women.

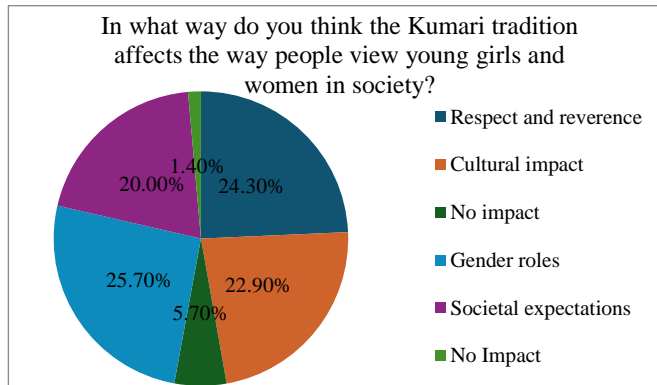


Fig. 7 The Influence of the kumari tradition on societal perceptions of young girls and women

The above chart illustrates how respondents perceive the Kumari tradition's influence on the societal views of young girls and women. The most cited impact was on gender roles (25.7%), followed closely by respect and reverence (24.3%), reflecting the tradition's role in shaping admiration for women. Cultural impact (22.9%) highlights its influence on societal norms, while societal expectations (20%) point to its role in defining behavioral standards for women. A small minority (5.7%) saw no impact, indicating limited relevance

to societal perceptions. The question of whether the Kumari tradition should be abandoned, maintained, or modified to reflect contemporary ideals is still up for debate. The practice has been central to discussions on gender equality, human rights, and cultural heritage, influencing both government actions and court decisions. Supporters argue that it honors divine femininity and should be maintained, while critics highlight concerns over its impact on a child's future. Legal rulings, such as Nepal's Supreme Court decision mandating education for Kumaris, attempt to balance tradition with child welfare, yet challenges persist in ensuring their long-term well-being. Examining whether reforms can uphold both tradition and individual freedoms or if the practice inherently conflicts with modern standards of child welfare and gender equality, this paper asked followers and non-followers to predict the future of the Kumari tradition in Nepal.

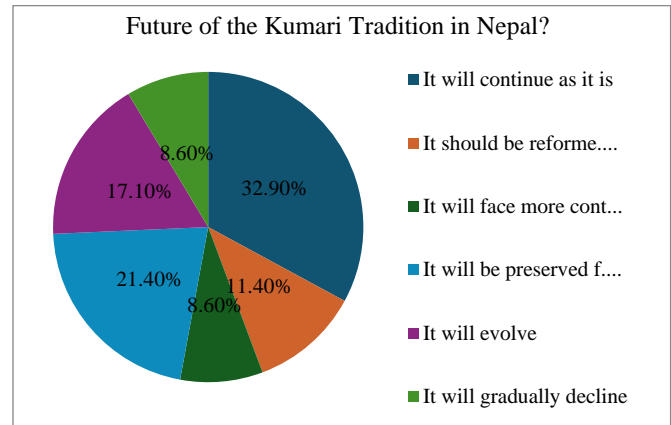


Fig. 8 Exploring the future of the kumari tradition

Approximately 40% of respondents believe it will continue unchanged, while 20% think it will be preserved primarily for tourism. Another 17% expect it to evolve, whereas 11% support reforms. Meanwhile, 8% foresee growing controversies, and 8% predict a gradual decline.

6. Discussion

The Kumari tradition sparks debate on its preservation, modification, or discontinuation, balancing cultural heritage with human rights concerns. While some view it as a symbol of divine femininity, others argue it imposes limitations on young girls. Legal interventions, such as Nepal's Supreme Court mandate for Kumari education, reflect efforts to modernize the practice while maintaining its significance.

6.1. Attitudes Toward the Tradition

6.1.1. Respondents Held Three Main Perspectives

- Support with Modification (40%)-Advocates for reform cited concerns about Kumari's restricted childhood while acknowledging its cultural value. A sociology respondent noted,

"She loses her childhood, which is the best part of her life."

- Unconditional Support (40%) - Supporters viewed the tradition as essential to Nepal's identity, emphasizing its religious, cultural, and tourism value.
- Opposition (20%) - Critics, including a human rights lawyer, condemned the tradition of imposing psychological burdens on young girls.

Most respondents agreed the tradition is widely recognized, particularly in Kathmandu, though fewer people actively practice it. Some saw it more as a cultural symbol than a personal belief system. While respondents varied in their understanding of the selection process, most agreed on specific physical and cultural criteria.

Overall, the Kumari tradition reflects ongoing tensions between heritage and modernity, with debates on balancing preservation with evolving societal values.

6.2. Perspectives on Physical Requirements

A recurring theme in the responses was physical purity, a defining trait of the Kumari. Many respondents saw her physical attributes as a reflection of her divine status. The most frequently mentioned requirements included no birthmarks, scars, or history of bleeding. When asked to mention other details, some respondents also stated other specific features, such as the shape of the Kumari's tongue. They said,

"I know there are different factors they need to meet, like their tongue, which needs to be in the shape of a cow's tongue. From a believer's perspective, this is an extremely important factor."

Beyond physical attributes, 30% of respondents noted other qualities, including maturity, courage, and kindness. A few emphasized that Kumari should exhibit leadership traits, while others questioned whether she holds any real power to impact society. Respondents described Kumari as someone who is,

"mature, courageous, and kind. I would assume it takes strong willpower and courage to serve as the goddess from such a young age."

Some responders suggested why they do not believe any quality for the Kumari is truly valuable as they said,

"I believe the Kumari does not have the power to bring change or impact the Nepalese community."

One respondent compared the strict beauty standards imposed on the Kumari to conventional beauty ideals,

"In most places, a girl is expected to be thin, fair, and have

long hair to be thought of as pretty. But for the Kumari, she is checked for her tongue, toes, and even navel. The stress she feels is unmatched by what most of us are accustomed to."

6.3. How Nepali Citizens View Young Girls and Women

While many respondents recognized the Kumari tradition as a powerful cultural and spiritual symbol, they also highlighted the broader societal implications, particularly concerning gender roles and mental well-being. Five respondents noted that she serves as a model for young girls, influencing perceptions of femininity. One respondent emphasized this concern, stating,

"The elevation of one girl comes at the cost of others who may feel discriminated against by society for not embodying the same divine qualities."

Others saw the tradition as reinforcing traditional gender roles, noting that while Nepal is a patriarchal society, the Kumari is briefly placed in a position of higher status than men.

The psychological impact of the tradition was another key concern. Multiple respondents discussed how it affects the mental health of young girls, particularly those exposed to its ideals. One follower of the tradition remarked,

"The connection between the Kumari and the broader social implications, including how women are treated when they experience natural biological processes like menstruation, is problematic as it associates womanhood with impurity."

However, not all respondents believed the tradition had a significant societal impact. One argued that its influence is limited, stating that only a small group of people actively follow it.

The most consistent concern across the responses was that being chosen as the Kumari severely restricts a girl's future in terms of education and marriage. Many respondents noted that Kumari is not allowed to get married or pursue an education, which limits her development. One responder also said,

"I strongly believe that Kumari's elevated status can be isolating, particularly once she ages out of the role, as she faces a stark transition from revered goddess to ordinary citizen".

Respondents further added that,

"This can create a cycle where women are judged based on physical appearance or the degree to which they align with traditional gender norms."

All seven respondents with daughters opposed the idea of their child serving as the Kumari, primarily due to concerns about losing a normal childhood. Many felt the role would prevent their daughters from participating in fundamental childhood experiences. One respondent expressed deep concern about the pressure and expectations placed on a Kumari, stating,

"I think the world already has enough individuals she would have to compete against to get a job, go to school, and even find a place in society. I do not want the Kumari to be another one."

They further argued that adding the burden of this role to existing societal challenges would be unfair to any child. Others viewed the tradition as outdated and irrelevant in modern times, with one respondent stating,

"No. I don't believe in the power of the Kumari, and it's not something any parent should willingly expose their girl to."

6.4. The Future of the Kumari Tradition: Perspectives on Continuity and Change

The study reveals generational differences in perspectives on the Kumari tradition, particularly regarding menstruation. Younger respondents generally opposed the removal of the Kumari upon menstruation, whereas older respondents were more likely to support this practice. However, across all age groups, there was consensus that the Kumari must remain a virgin, as suggested by the very meaning of her title.

For respondents who follow the tradition, physical appearance remains a crucial factor in the selection process. Notably, both followers and non-followers largely agreed that the physical examination of candidates remains a relevant practice. The survey and interview data highlight the significance of physical attributes, particularly the absence of birthmarks and other imperfections, along with the relevance of social origins in terms of caste and family identities as being critical in determining eligibility for the role. These findings align with interview responses in which followers provided detailed descriptions of the strict physical criteria, such as possessing a cow-shaped tongue and a perfect set of 32 teeth.

However, perspectives diverged regarding the importance of internal qualities. While traditionalists maintained a strong attachment to the idea of physical perfection, others emphasized characteristics such as maturity, courage, and kindness. Some respondents also criticized Kumari's beauty standards, noting that the physical requirements for selection are more extreme than those typically associated with conventional beauty norms. This suggests that while the selection process is rooted in religious tradition, it may also reflect broader societal ideals in Nepal. Despite differences in opinion, the majority of respondents-both followers and non-

followers-supported the continuation of the Kumari tradition, albeit with modifications to address its challenges. Survey data indicate that most respondents believe the tradition will persist in its current form, particularly due to its cultural and tourism significance. This theme was reinforced in the interviews, with one respondent stating,

"Faith, beliefs, and traditions are very difficult to break."

Several respondents with experience in governmental affairs highlighted the state's role in preserving the tradition. One remarked,

"They always emphasize the Kumari's importance for our society. Most Nepali government officials have a deep love for the Kumari, but some only want it to exist for the tourism benefits. But again, that tells us that the tradition will remain and not change."

- Priya, Aged 42, Business, Follower of Tradition.

Additionally, some respondents discussed the broader cultural context of the Kumari tradition within the Indra Jatra festival. One respondent noted,

"It's important to realize that Indra Jatra is more than just the Kumari; it's about celebrating the end of the monsoon season. The Kumari is a part of it, yes, but I appreciate the deeper meaning behind the festival."

- Shaurya, Aged 45, is a Business Follower of Tradition.

Another respondent pointed out the historical connection between the tradition and Nepal's monarchy, stating,

"A lot of these rituals are connected to the king of Nepal, like matching the horoscopes. But Nepal is not a monarchy anymore, and it's funny to think about how we have not brought any changes to the tradition yet."

- Aarav, Aged 38, Teacher, Not a follower of the tradition.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this paper suggest that while the Kumari tradition is likely to persist, modifications may be necessary to align it with contemporary values. Generational differences indicate a shift in perspectives, with younger respondents questioning aspects of physical purity while older respondents adhere to traditional beliefs. Additionally, concerns regarding the well-being of the Kumari, particularly in terms of isolation, education, and future opportunities, highlight the need for reform. Ultimately, while the Kumari tradition remains deeply ingrained in Nepalese society, its continued relevance may depend on how well it adapts to modern social and human rights considerations. While a larger survey

sample and more qualitative interviews would have provided a deeper understanding of the diverse perspectives on the Kumari tradition, this study nevertheless offers critical insights into public perceptions. Incorporating viewpoints from former Kumaris, religious leaders, and policymakers

could have further enriched the analysis. Despite these limitations, the study contributes meaningfully to the evolving discourse on the Kumari tradition, highlighting key areas for further exploration and potential reform.

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